



IDEAS

*A Journal of Student Policy Ideas
from Across the Roosevelt Network*



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Who We Are

The Roosevelt Network trains, develops, and supports emerging progressive policymakers, researchers, and advocates, focusing on communities historically denied political power. With locations on campuses and in cities in nearly 40 US states, the Network is founded on the principle that changing who writes the rules can help fulfill the promise of American democracy and build true public power. The Network supports student-led, scalable policy campaigns that fight for the equitable provision, distribution, and accessibility of public goods at the campus, local, and state levels. In addition to its student-led activities, the organization leverages the power of its alumni network—which includes public officials, lawyers, teachers, nonprofit executives, and researchers—to expand opportunities for the next generation of policy leaders. A program of the Roosevelt Institute, the Network operates alongside leading economists and political scientists to bring the ideals of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt into the 21st century.

What You're Reading

Now in its 13th edition, the Roosevelt Network's 10 Ideas journal is a testament to the importance of changing who writes the rules. While this journal isn't a policy agenda of our network, it does highlight the issue areas most important to our students during a year in which we've lived through a global pandemic, economic crisis, and mass movements to confront white supremacy and police brutality. The 10 student-developed policy proposals in this journal are visionary but also scalable. They chart bold new ways to deploy public power for the public good, spanning issue areas and geographies. Each proposal is the product of at least six months of work that included identifying a problem, conducting formal research, organizing and collaborating with local organizations and partners, and an intensive editing and review period that involved feedback from Roosevelt staff and alumni.

How You Can Participate

To learn more about our work and how to get involved, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at [@RooseveltNTWRK](#) and visit our website www.rooseveltinstitute.org. Together, we can change who writes the rules and help fulfill the ideals of American democracy, revive our economy, and build true public power. Thank you for reading and supporting the work of Rooseveltters.



Dear Readers,

It is an incredibly daunting task to address the last year and a half succinctly in this letter. But as I sit in my childhood bedroom fighting my dad for bandwidth on the wifi, and my cat meows at me to feed him from across the room, I will do my best. This is an opening to the 10 Ideas journal unlike any other, in a year that has been unlike any other.

As I've thought about the last 15 months, the word I have found myself coming back to is unrelenting. On top of the pain, isolation, and loss from COVID-19, emboldened white supremacy has escalated as a very real and constant threat. There is an urgent need for visionary new ideas to lead us out of this moment, yet our focus has been continuously pulled to react to the onslaught of threats. Just making it through the day or the week has sometimes felt like all that we can do, and too many of us know people who have not made it.

Many times, I have wished I had more to offer in the way of solutions, or more answers about what we can do to confront the compounding crises we're living through. But when I read the policies in this journal for the first time all together, I was reminded that I alone don't need to have all the answers; we, collectively, have the answers. At its core, policy is a mechanism for realizing the dreams we have for our communities. The ideas in this journal dream of safety, of justice, of accountability. They respond to the last 15 months and push us beyond our current reality toward something better. They demonstrate the power and creativity of this network, one that I am deeply humbled and honored to lead (in yoga pants, surrounded by baby-blue painted walls, under the watchful eye of my cat).

Wherever you are as you read this, I hope that the ideas in this journal inspire you as they have inspired me. I hope that they offer a glimmer of hope that we all so desperately need. I am very proud of the ideas here, and of all the work that has gone into making this journal possible. Mostly, I am proud of this network and each person who helps make it stronger. Thank you for continuing to rewrite the rules with us.



Katie Kirchner
National Director, Roosevelt Network

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Changing University Hiring Processes to Protect Students From Sexual Harassment

By Ella Chinn

Roosevelt @ SUNY Binghamton

THESIS

To protect its students, SUNY Binghamton should change its hiring processes and require potential professors to be transparent regarding past accusations of sexual harassment or misconduct at former places of employment.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Colleges have a responsibility to create a safe environment in which students are able to pursue an education and grow. However, certain hiring processes at colleges across the US can make it harder to attain this safety, as professors who sexually harass students are able to resign if they are not found guilty of an actual crime and be hired at a different institution (Brown et al. 2020; Flaherty 2017). This creates an unsafe environment for students at the professor's next position. In fact, over half of professors who are sexual assault aggressors are past offenders, meaning that they had committed an offense at a previous place of work and were then rehired at a different institution where they committed similar offenses (Flaherty 2017). Colleges can take the appropriate actions to try and ensure their students' safety, but oftentimes they may be completely unaware of applicants' past violations. This may happen for several reasons, including the fact that a harassment or misconduct violation wouldn't show up on a criminal background check, or that the previous college signed a confidential settlement agreement in order to preserve its own reputation (Schlavensky 2019). This vicious cycle protects and grants anonymity to aggressors, allowing them to become repeat offenders while leaving survivors without a way to heal and seek justice.

Due to the vague definition of sexual harassment and the confidentiality of most reports, it is difficult to get an accurate and complete understanding of the extent of sexual harassment by faculty members on college campuses (AAUW n.d.). However, a 2018 study shed light on statistics regarding the prevalence of sexual harassment by professors. The study found that "one in ten female graduate students at major research universities report being sexually harassed by a faculty member" (Chi 2018). In another study involving 525 male and female graduate students, 38 percent of female students and 23.4 percent of male students reported having been sexually harassed by a faculty member (Rosenthal 2016).

Due to the issue of underreporting, it is difficult to find data specific to SUNY Binghamton. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the school has a problem with sexual violence. Last year, an Instagram account called @shareyourstorybing became popular. The account provides a platform for survivors to anonymously share their stories regarding sexual assault, sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence at SUNY Binghamton. Since the account's first post in June of 2020, it has shared over 800 submissions, many of which describe the predatory actions of professors and faculty members. The administration at Binghamton University has voiced their support for survivors, but more action must be taken to prevent these instances of sexual violence from occurring in the first place.

THE POLICY IDEA

When hiring new educators, SUNY Binghamton should require applicants to sign an "Authorization to Release Information Form" as part of the application process. The form would require that SUNY Binghamton be made aware of all accusations of sexual harassment or other forms of misconduct by the applicant at former places of employment. Such incidents would then be evaluated in accordance with Binghamton University's Faculty Code of Conduct (Binghamton University n.d.) to determine whether the applicant should be considered for the position.

POLICY ANALYSIS

This policy could have a monumental impact on the lives of Binghamton University students. By adding the proposed extra layer of protection against offending applicants, SUNY Binghamton will better protect its students and more thoroughly vet incoming faculty members.

It is in the university's best interest to support this policy. Given the national data and the prevalence of sexual violence on campus evidenced by the @shareyourstorybing account, this worrying trend could have significant negative impacts for SUNY Binghamton should it continue. Sexual harassment by a professor not only puts students' safety in jeopardy and causes them lasting harm, it also hurts the institution's reputation and leads to extra legal fees the university must pay for. Modern interpretations of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 have put the burden on institutions in the case of sexual misconduct by an employee, which has led to universities being held liable for such incidents (Wilson 2014).

Other universities have already successfully implemented similar policies. In 2018, UC Davis sought to put a stop to the cycle of rehiring repeat offenders by implementing a pilot program in its hiring process (UC Davis n.d.) that required applicants to sign an "Authorization to Release Information Form." This form allowed officials to ask questions and access information related to "findings of misconduct," even if that information was confidential. In 2018, the University of Wisconsin successfully implemented a similar policy in its hiring process as well (UW n.d.). This additional layer of vetting helps to protect students and ensure that they are being given a safe environment where they are able to learn.

One argument against this kind of policy is that it might be problematic for faculty who were falsely accused of sexual harassment. However, instances of falsified allegations of sexual harassment are extremely rare (Lazard 2017), and while this policy may reveal reported incidences of misconduct, it does not bar administrators from hiring the applicant in question since it allows for cases to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

TALKING POINTS

- The "pass the harasser" trend occurs at colleges and universities across the US and allows faculty who have sexually harassed students at one institution to covertly resign and then be employed at a new one. This enables repeat offenders and allows them to avoid consequences (Brown et al. 2020).
- Over half of the cases of sexual harassment by faculty members on college campuses involve repeat offenders (Flaherty 2017).
- Requiring transparency when hiring new faculty helps to keep students safe and discourages past offenders from applying to new open positions.
- Even if a misconduct report was filed at a former place of employment, the situation of each job applicant will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine if the accusation disqualifies them from the position.

Toward Restorative Justice in Missouri Schools: Crafting More Specific School Suspension Guidelines

By Matthew Friedman, George Johnson, and Borna Dianati

Roosevelt @ Washington University in St. Louis

THESIS

Missouri should expand its in-school suspension guidelines to create a more productive suspension experience for students, employing restorative justice practices to reduce the necessity of out-of-school suspensions and to lessen the racial achievement and attainment gaps.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Missouri has a large racial achievement gap in education: Black students score 23 percentage points lower than their white peers on reading and math tests (Delaney and Moxley 2019) and have a graduation rate 12 percentage points lower than white students (NCES 2020). School suspensions account for one-fifth of the difference in Black-white student performance (Morris and Perry 2016): In Missouri, even though Black students make up just 16 percent of the state's public school population, they represent nearly half of all out-of-school suspensions (Groeger et al. 2018). In the 2015–2016 school year, Missouri's Black students lost 122 days of school per 100 students to out of school suspension, compared to just 22 days lost per 100 students for white students (Losen and Whitaker 2018). Reforming Missouri's suspension system would therefore address racial disparities in education and begin to tackle the school-to-prison-pipeline, the system by which overly strict school punishment shifts (predominately Black) students off of educational pathways and into the criminal justice system, contributing to mass incarceration (Schiff 2013).

Out-of-school suspension (OSS) is particularly harmful to students, as it damages their self-perceptions and confidence while also restricting their learning—OSS is associated with significant drops in educational achievement and higher dropout rates (Noltemeyer, Ward, and McLaughlin 2015). The unnecessary vagueness of Missouri's OSS policy allows for implicit bias in suspension decisions, as the only requirement for a student to be suspended out of school is that the student's conduct be “prejudicial to good order and discipline in the schools or which tends to impair the morale or good conduct of the pupils” (Baker 2017, 28). This lack of clarity means, for example, that it is up to administrators to determine what constitutes behavior that would merit suspension, and that an administrator could decide that a Black student's behavior is “prejudicial to good order” even if a white student doing the same thing is not punished as harshly.

Missouri law encourages schools to give in-school suspensions before moving to out-of-school suspensions (US Department of Education 2020), providing an opportunity to use in-school suspensions as a learning experience that would prevent future suspension or disciplinary action. However, there is no guidance about what in-school suspension should entail (US Department of Education 2020).

Restorative justice focuses on helping students grow from their mistakes, and in the context of suspensions could employ future-oriented discussions rather than a punishment-focused approach. Incorporating elements of restorative justice into discipline routines—such as conversations with harmed individuals—has fostered success in schools nationwide (Gregory and Evans 2020).

THE POLICY IDEA

The Missouri legislature should grant authority to the state Board of Education to convene a committee made up of education researchers, teachers, and principals to develop more specific guidelines for schools to approach suspensions through restorative justice practices. These new guidelines should give instructions for how to provide restorative and growth-based in-school suspension programs that will lessen the state's reliance on out-of-school suspensions and help limit the racial achievement gap.

POLICY ANALYSIS

We advocate for a holistic approach to address racial disparities in school suspensions; our policy would reduce harmful out-of-school suspension programs while also providing guidance for effective in-school suspensions to take their place. This two-pronged method would enrich students' learning by not depriving them of valuable time spent in class, while also reducing the detrimental impacts of out-of-school suspension.

A committee appointed by the Board of Education would be the best way to implement our idea because it will be able to balance information from literature on restorative justice with the realities of Missouri classrooms. Our policy would streamline the implementation process for creating guidelines for in-school suspension by taking advantage of the Board of Education as a structure that already exists. Instituting new guidelines without consulting relevant experts risks rushed, uninformed plans that would serve to maintain the status quo. For example, states like Virginia have attempted to implement bans on out-of-school suspensions without providing infrastructure for in-school suspensions, leading to ineffective results (Woolard, Salas, and Deane 2018). While out-of-school punishment is antiquated and punishes students without restoring positive behavior, immediately banning it would put schools in untenable positions.

Pairing a reduction in OSS with new guidelines for in-school suspension like emphasis on growth mindset will allow for students' emotional enrichment and prevent future harm. These benefits will return any investment associated with shifting to and improving in-school suspension programs, as more students will avoid the school-to-prison pipeline and there will be less need for spending on other social services. For example, through the use of techniques such as peer mediation and restorative circles, 277 Minnesota school principals found that behavior referrals and suspensions dropped by 45 to 63 percent, while academic achievement as a whole also increased (Schiff 2013). Furthermore, restorative justice programs in other parts of the country have led to significant reductions in out-of-school suspensions, such as at West Philadelphia High School where the implementation of restorative justice measures was associated with a 50 percent drop in the rate of out-of-school suspensions within a year (Schiff 2013, 10). Creating positive relationships between students and faculty reduces recidivism rates and fosters a learning environment in which students learn the value of responsibility rather than feeling humiliated by traditional punishment.

Restorative justice is a way to reduce the increasing similarities between public school systems and juvenile detention centers (for example, increased police presence, zero tolerance policies, and metal detectors), while also improving students' academic ability. Rather than relying on punishment and brute force methods that often target minority students—mirroring the justice system—schools can turn toward practices such as restorative mediation in order to build an inclusive community built upon students taking accountability for their actions rather than suffering harmful, arbitrary, and often meaningless punishment.

TALKING POINTS

- Missouri's current guidelines for school suspensions are vague, allowing districts to punish students however they like.
- In Missouri, 44 percent of out-of-school suspensions are given to Black students even though they make up only 16 percent of all students (Groeger et al. 2018).
- Overuse of out-of-school suspensions and ineffective use of in-school suspensions harm students' academic growth and disproportionately harm Black students, further entrenching the school-to-prison pipeline (Morris and Perry 2016, 68).
- Restorative justice programs have led to significant reductions in out-of-school suspensions, such as at West Philadelphia High School where the implementation of restorative justice measures was associated with a 50 percent drop in the rate of out-of-school suspensions within a year (Schiff 2013, 10).
- Schools that adopt restorative justice measures can avoid the negative academic effects associated with school suspensions, which would limit the racial achievement gap (Payne and Welch 2013).

Expanding Digital Equity from Seattle to All of King County

By Titus Kariuki

Roosevelt @ University of Washington

THESIS

To counter the ongoing digital inequities affecting the Black and Latinx residents of King County, WA, the county government should expand Seattle's Technology Matching Fund (TMF) county-wide, enabling nonprofits to allocate digital resources necessary for job accessibility to residents who lack access to them.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Thirty percent of King County households lack access to computers and digital devices (Public Health — Seattle and King County 2020), compared to only 6 percent of households in the entire state of Washington (US Census Bureau 2019). Based on the 2019 census count, this means that approximately 676,000 out of the total 2,252,782 King County residents do not have access to computers. Fifty-two percent (roughly 351,000) of the residents who lack access to digital resources are Black and Latinx (City of Seattle Digital Equity Initiative 2016), and have faced increased difficulties as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced millions of workers to work remotely. Data from a 2017-2018 US Bureau of Labor Statistics survey showed that from a select number of participants, only 19.7 percent of Black residents (3,522 out of 17,924) and 16.2 percent of the Hispanic and Latinx residents (3,961 out of 24,375) were able to work from home, whereas 29.9 percent of their white counterparts could do so (34,390 out of 115,129) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). These marginalized groups of people would have been an added resource to the county's economy had they been able to access equitable resources that allowed them to work remotely.

There are several causes of digital inequity across the US. One is disproportionate socioeconomic income levels: Those who earn over \$75,000 are 20 times more likely to have internet and 10 times more likely to own a computer than people who earn \$30,000 or less. Furthermore, low- and middle-income residents are less digitally literate, hindering their professional development (Mracek 2018). Level of education is another factor that influences digital inequity; college degree holders are 10 times likelier to have internet access as compared to individuals with a high school education or lower, which further widens the digital illiteracy gap (Steele 2019). This gap in digital equity is self-perpetuating, as internet access and digital skills are often crucial for attaining employment and developing skills for an ever-evolving economy (Mracek 2018).

In King County specifically, one cause of digital inequity is the lack of a concrete structure to distribute digital infrastructure throughout the county. The City of Seattle has worked to solve this issue within the city itself; since the 1990s, the city has partnered with organizations on various programs to increase digital equity, including a Technology Matching Fund (TMF) that gives grants to qualifying nonprofit organizations in Seattle for up to \$25,000 for digital equity projects. In 2015, Seattle launched a Digital Equity Initiative with further plans and strategies to help Seattle residents access and utilize digital resources (City of Seattle Digital Equity Initiative 2016).

THE POLICY IDEA

A Technology Matching Fund (TMF) should be implemented by the King County Department of Information Technology (KCIT). It should function similarly to Seattle's TMF, and should provide \$25,000 grants to fund qualifying nonprofits to implement digital equity projects. These projects will increase internet and technology access to Black and Latinx communities via digital skills and provision of devices and broadband (Seattle IT 2018). Continual allocation of TMF grants would expand technology access and help the Black and Latinx communities get more involved in the county economy.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Since its inception, Seattle's TMF has provided free internet to 223 organizations and low-cost internet to 2,469 low-income residents, 182 of whom got laptops as well. These resources have enhanced connectivity and opportunities for Seattle residents, especially those from Seattle Housing Authority communities and children in public housing (Seattle IT 2019). Furthermore, the TMF has funded 23 organizations that provide digital skills training, and so far 1,496 residents have been trained in basic technology and digital skills. Additionally, this training and funding has allowed 373 of those residents to receive job opportunities and improve their career skills, and 1,285 youth have benefited from the STEM, digital learning, and enrichment programs funded by the TMF (City of Seattle 2018).

The underserved Black and Latinx residents of King County would benefit from an expansion of the TMF, as it would give them greater technology exposure and therefore increased preparedness heading into the job market (Liu 2019). Prospective employers would also benefit from this policy, as it would expand and diversify available digital labor (Funk and Parker 2018). Other beneficiaries of the TMF would be local organizations and small businesses, who with the help of the King County Information Technology Department (KCIT), could implement technology solutions that help them function and provide tech-efficient services to their clients.

One argument against this proposal might be its cost, given the local government's limited resources. However, funding the TMF will be an investment in the county. An expanded TMF would allow nonprofits to supply technology to underserved Black and Latinx communities, who in turn could leverage their technology resources and skills to be a more active part of the local economy.

TALKING POINTS

- Nearly 351,000 Black and Latinx King County residents lack or have limited access to digital devices (Public Health-Seattle and King County 2020).
- Technology may not be necessary for all jobs, but technology skills are. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital skills and access to digital equipment allow for remote work, providing income during unforeseen times and reducing unemployment claims.
- A Technology Matching Fund could provide grants worth up to \$25,000 to qualifying King County nonprofits to accelerate digital equity action plans to underserved communities.

Increasing Knowledge and Consumption of Folic Acid for Hispanic Women in Dallas

By Nigel Gray, Sana Khan, Lexis Khetsavanh, and Nithya Jaisankar
Roosevelt @ University of Texas at Dallas

THESIS

To address racial disparities in the occurrence of neural tube defects in infants, Dallas authorities should implement local education initiatives via a community health worker model to increase Hispanic women's knowledge and consumption of folic acid.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Women who are able to reproduce (ages 15–50) are advised to take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily to prevent infant neural tube defects (NTDs)—severe birth defects of the brain and spinal cord (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019). However, a 2002 study found that only 21 percent of Hispanic women obtain the recommended amount of folic acid from fortified foods and supplements compared to 40.5 percent of non-Hispanic white women. Lower knowledge and consumption of folic acid and higher rates of unintended pregnancies among Hispanic women make them vulnerable to having babies with birth defects, especially because NTDs often occur by the first month of pregnancy, before a woman is even aware she is pregnant (Flores et al. 2017; Preidt 2008). Around one in five women in Dallas are Hispanic, and the infant mortality rate in Dallas county is higher than that of Texas as a whole—7.4 deaths per 1,000 live births—making the issue of preventing NTDs especially important in the Dallas area (Parkland Hospital 2008; US Census Bureau 2019). Birth defects are the number one cause of death for Hispanic infants in the US (Ely and Driskoll 2019, 16). Educating Hispanic women on the importance of folic acid consumption can decrease the prevalence of NTDs by 85 percent, but a disproportionate number of Hispanic women, especially those who primarily speak Spanish or have lived in the US for a shorter period of time, do not know about the benefits of folic acid and do not consume the recommended amount (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019).

Nationally, treating birth defects cost over \$2.2 billion in 2010, and the average cost per hospitalization in Texas was \$53,000 (Arth et al. 2017; Texas Department of State Health Services 2019). Yet these statistics do not even touch on the cost of long-term care. In Texas, 30.8 percent of Hispanic residents are uninsured—more than twice the rate of uninsured white residents—making it impossible for a large number of them to obtain adequate care for a child with birth defects (Kaiser Family Foundation 2020). Moreover, not having insurance prevents women from securing affordable prenatal supplements, further exacerbating poor health and financial outcomes for Hispanic populations.

THE POLICY IDEA

We propose the creation of community health care programs specifically designed to teach Hispanic women in the Dallas area about folic acid. In the past, this kind of model has succeeded in educating Hispanic communities on illnesses such as diabetes and arthritis (National Center for Farmworker Health 2019). By applying the model toward folic acid, we hope to increase awareness for women of childbearing age about the importance of folic acid consumption to prevent neural tube defects in newborns.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Our policy would follow the Promotores de Salud model, which has been effective in increasing awareness regarding other health care topics in the past (Flores et al. 2017). This model operates through the recruitment of community health care workers, or Promotores, who are well-known members of Hispanic communities trained to educate other members of their community on health care issues. This model works well because people tend to follow the advice of those they identify with rather than general informational pamphlets.

For example, a study implemented in Harris County, Texas to test the effectiveness of the Promotores de Salud model for folic acid education showed an eleven-fold increase in folic acid consumption among Hispanic women ages 18–45 after a folic acid and NTD educational session and after the women were provided with a 90-day supply of multivitamins (Flores et al. 2017).

As a result of education about the importance of folic acid, folic acid intake will likely increase. This could be somewhat costly—the average cost of folic acid is \$6.00 for 90 tablets, which means women of reproductive age would need to spend approximately \$900 on folic acid during the years they are able to reproduce—assuming they take one tablet every day during this time. However, these costs are minuscule in comparison to the cost of future NTD treatment—\$51,574 per patient per year—which is mostly funded through government programs such as Medicaid (Yi et al. 2011).

Overall, increasing folic acid consumption among women will reduce their future burden of disease and provide Hispanic populations with more resources to invest in education, health, and quality of life.

TALKING POINTS

- The prevalence of neural tube defects (NTDs) among babies born to Hispanic women is greater than for non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic Black women, and can be prevented through increased consumption of folic acid, a crucial prenatal vitamin (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019).
- Folic acid education in Harris County, Texas led to an eleven-fold increase in folic acid consumption among Hispanic women between the ages of 18–45 years after a folic acid and NTD educational session and after the women were provided with a 90-day supply of multivitamins (Flores et al. 2017).
- Increasing maternal prenatal folic acid intake will prevent about 40 NTDs for Hispanic infants each year (CDC 2019).
- By implementing the Promotores de Salud model and training community health care workers to educate Hispanic women on folic acid, more women will be aware of the importance of this supplement in their diets, leading to a healthier population (Flores et. al 2017).

Installing Public Bathrooms to Aid People Experiencing Homelessness in Bakersfield and Kern County

By **Tori Brookings**

Roosevelt @ University of Southern California

THESIS

To provide proper sanitation for people experiencing homelessness in the City of Bakersfield and Kern County, CA, the Bakersfield-Kern Regional Homeless Collaborative should fund the installation and maintenance of public bathrooms—modeled after the Portland Loo—in both downtown Bakersfield and Old Town Kern.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

In recent years, Kern County and the City of Bakersfield have demonstrated their commitment to rectifying their ongoing homelessness crisis. The Bakersfield-Kern Regional Homeless Collaborative (BKRHC) was restructured in August of 2019, creating a nonprofit agency funded by the city and county that focuses on ending homelessness (Morgen 2019). The organization's 2021 report found that there are 2,150 people experiencing homelessness in Kern County (BKRHC 2021). Of this number, over half (1,581 individuals) are unsheltered (BKRHC 2021). The report also showed that homelessness disproportionately affects Black people in the county, as they account for 22 percent of the homeless population (BKRHC 2021) but just 6.3 percent of the county's total population (based on the 2020 Census) (US Census Bureau 2020). Additionally, although 30.6 percent of the men experiencing homelessness in Kern County were part of the sheltered count, only 21.6 percent of women experiencing homelessness were identified in the sheltered count—meaning a higher percentage of women than men experiencing homelessness were unsheltered. Despite some efforts by the county, lack of sanitation access for people experiencing homelessness is an issue that government officials have failed to adequately navigate—an even more vital need since the county's homeless population increased 27 percent in 2021 (Luiz 2021).

Even before 2021, access to sanitation for people experiencing homelessness was a significant issue. In September of 2019, Bakersfield City Council hired a private company for \$91,000 to remove excrement in Downtown Bakersfield and Old Town Kern (Luiz 2020). The contract was amended in October to include urine cleanup services for an additional \$31,000 (Luiz 2020). Throughout the initial three-month program, the cleanup service responded to 649 reports of human waste (Luiz 2020). The city still uses the program and voted to expand its coverage in March of 2021 for \$44,000, which shows that human waste presence has not declined since the program's start (KGET 2021). Without access to adequate bathrooms, people experiencing homelessness are exposed to infectious diseases and forced to use inconvenient and unhealthy sanitation practices. For example, during San Diego's 2016–2018 outbreak of Hepatitis A—which is transmitted through the fecal-oral route—people experiencing homelessness had 3.3 times higher odds of infection and 3.9 times higher odds of death associated with the disease (Peak et al. 2020). Furthermore, because poor sanitation is viewed as disrespectful in normal societal conventions, people experiencing homelessness who cannot access bathrooms also face social marginalization (De Vananzi 2008).

In 2008, the City of Portland, OR constructed a public bathroom to ensure sanitation access for its rising homeless population (Beaven 2019). The bathroom, called the Portland Loo, was designed to deter crime through features such as angled panels at the top and bottom of the bathroom; these panels increase visibility and thus allow law enforcement and security personnel to survey activity inside (Portland Loo 2020). The Portland Loo design uses durable building materials, and so it also prevents costly maintenance expenditures (Portland Loo 2020). As of 2019, more than 20 other cities have installed bathrooms of the same design (Portland Loo 2019).

THE POLICY IDEA

The BKRHC should fund the installation and maintenance of two Portland Loo public bathrooms—in Downtown Bakersfield and Old Town Kern—to provide sanitation access for Kern County’s homeless population. These bathrooms should be sited according to Crime Prevention Environmental Design standards, which would maximize visibility by placing the bathrooms in high traffic areas (Portland Loo 2020). Additionally, the bathrooms should be monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to further ensure their success.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Installing Portland Loo public bathrooms in Downtown Bakersfield and Old Town Kern will assist the homeless population, as well as nearby businesses.

In San Antonio, the number of citations issued for public urination were cut in half 10 months after the city installed its Portland Loo (Zielinski 2017). This improvement suggests that installing local units could successfully reduce human waste reports. Furthermore, results from a questionnaire sent in 2019 to cities with a Portland Loo in commercial areas show that nearby businesses in 13 of 14 cities are supportive of the bathroom, suggesting they were positively benefited by its installation (Bernbaum 2019).

Installing public bathrooms will also help people experiencing homelessness in Kern County. By decreasing the amount of human waste, the homeless population will be less vulnerable to infectious diseases. Moreover, the Portland Loos can rectify challenges related to menstruation and homelessness; a study conducted in New York City found that “uncertain access to safe, clean, private spaces for changing menstrual products” was a notable difficulty when managing menstruation while homeless (Sommer et. al 2020). Considering that a high percentage of women in Kern County’s 2020 homeless population were unsheltered, it is clear that there is a need to provide reliable bathrooms to help people who menstruate (BKRHC 2020).

The Portland Loo is cost-effective—after a one-time upfront cost, yearly maintenance costs of the bathroom are much cheaper than the cleanup service utilized by the City of Bakersfield. One bathroom costs approximately \$130,000 to install and \$12,000 to \$20,000 a year to maintain (Bernbaum 2019), while the cleanup service used by the City of Bakersfield cost \$44,000 in 2021 (KGET 2021).

Citizens may be wary of the Portland Loos attracting criminal activity. However, while other cities with the bathroom faced this problem, their bathrooms were either not monitored or did not use highly visible sites (Bernbaum 2019). This policy’s plan to use more visible sites and include monitoring would avoid abuse of the bathrooms.

TALKING POINTS

- Kern County’s homeless population increased 27 percent in 2021 (Luiz 2021).
- The City of Bakersfield’s cleanup service responded to 649 reports of human waste in Bakersfield and Old Town Kern over three months in 2019 (Luiz 2020). The service was then expanded in 2021, meaning that issues with human waste have not declined since the program’s start (Bakersfield 2021).
- Inadequate sanitation threatens the health of the homeless population. During San Diego’s 2016–2018 outbreak of Hepatitis A—which is transmitted through the fecal-oral route—people experiencing homelessness had 3.3 times higher odds of infection (Peak et. al 2020). Lack of access to safe, clean, and private bathrooms is also burdensome during menstruation for people experiencing homelessness (Sommer et al. 2020).
- In San Antonio, the number of citations issued for public urination were cut in half 10 months after installation of a Portland Loo (Zielinski 2017). Additionally, nearby businesses surveyed in 13 of 14 cities that installed Portland Loos are supportive of the bathroom (Bernbaum 2019).

Redistributing the George Mason University Police Department Budget to Create a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team

By Malcolm Law, Erica Harp, Ashley Stewart, Lexi Wilson, and Saahil Iyer

Roosevelt @ George Mason University

THESIS

In order to expand access to mental health care services for students and prevent police violence against those with mental health conditions, George Mason University (GMU) should redistribute 2.14 percent of the \$8 million GMU Police Department budget to establish a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team (MCIT).

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

On May 14, 2018, Marcus-David Peters, a 24-year-old Black man, was killed by Richmond, VA police while experiencing a mental health crisis. Peters' story is unfortunately a familiar one; the chance of a person suffering from untreated mental illness being killed during an encounter with law enforcement is 16 times higher than for others approached by police (Fuller et al. 2015). Black men showing signs of mental illness are also more likely to be shot and killed by police than white men exhibiting similar behaviors (Thomas, Jewel, and Allen 2020).

These biases are also gendered—racially gendered narratives framing women of color as inherently “mentally unstable” also contribute to the ways police interact with Black and Indigenous women, and other women of color (Ritchie 2017). Although no official statistics exist, police encounters analyzed and compiled by prominent lawyer and activist Andrea Ritchie indicate that police responses to mental health crises make up a significant proportion of fatal encounters with police for Black women and women of color (Ritchie 2017).

College campuses are not exempt from police violence, and often have many students who struggle with mental illness. Suicide is now the second most common cause of death among college students, and college students have suffered from worsening mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Turner, Leno, and Keller 2020). Sixty-three percent of students reported that their emotional health is worse than before the pandemic (Jed Foundation 2020), and in June of 2020, 25 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds contemplated suicide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Czeisler et al. 2020).

College campus police carry much of the same history as non-campus police forces, and there have been several instances of violence against students experiencing mental health crises at colleges across the US (Weissman 2020). In light of these problems, colleges such as Stanford have begun shifting the responsibility of responding to students in crisis away from campus police. In recent decades, other communities have also established programs to better respond to mental health crises. These include co-responder programs, in which medical and social work professionals rather than police respond to crises. It follows that college campuses, which have police forces that often operate independently from the local police department, should take similar steps to better serve students.

THE POLICY IDEA

George Mason University should establish a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team (MCIT) program, similar to the CAHOOTS program in Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, to respond to mental health crises on campus. This will mean that professionals adequately trained in mental health arrive first to calls about mental health crises, and can better manage and deescalate the situation, while also limiting police contact with students suffering from mental illnesses.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Police officers across the country have expressed feeling under-equipped to respond to mental health crises. This lack of preparation, coupled with the history of violence in policing, has meant that individuals with mental health conditions are at a higher risk of being killed or incarcerated instead of being connected with mental health resources (Davis, Chelsea, and Pope 2016).

With a two-person team made up of a medical professional and a mental health crisis worker who will have extensive training in de-escalation and connections to external mental health services, the Mobile Crisis Intervention Team will be better equipped to deescalate mental health crises. The MCIT would also let individuals with mental health conditions avoid contact with police; such an approach could help prevent future fatal encounters (Ritchie 2017). Having mental health professionals arrive at the scene first will allow for on-site care and effective diversion to mental health services.

The mental health response program in Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets), serves as a model for how this policy could function at GMU. CAHOOTS calls are received by 911, where dispatchers identify non-violent, behavioral health situations and redirect calls to the CAHOOTS workers. Each team has two people—a medical professional (a nurse, paramedic, or EMT) and a crisis worker with substantial training and experience working in the mental health field (Butler and Sheriff 2020). To bring this system to GMU, two teams of two, each available for on-call service, would make up the initial pilot program's staff, with opportunities to expand the program and staff in the future. Additional training will also be required in order to ensure staff are equipped to respond to a wide range of scenarios involving physical and mental health, de-escalation, and coordination with local mental health providers (Beck, Reuland, and Pope 2020). Current staff from GMU's Student Health Services and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) could be involved in giving these trainings.

Eugene's CAHOOTS program costs \$4.75 per resident of the city (Eugene Police Department n.d.). Scaled to GMU's population, this would be a cost of \$171,000 to serve 36,000 students. This is equivalent to only 2.14 percent of GMU PD's \$8,000,000 budget. This initiative therefore does not come with an exorbitant price tag, as it meets its per capita requirements using just a small percentage of the GMU PD's budget.

While some argue that mental health and medical professionals aren't equipped to confront potentially dangerous situations, data from the CAHOOTS program showed that police backup is rarely required—of the 24,000 CAHOOTS calls received in 2019, police backup was requested just 150 times, or less than 1 percent of calls (Butler and Sheriff 2020)—and was still available if necessary.

At GMU, some police officers have received crisis intervention training (CIT), but evidence is inconclusive as to whether this training leads to fewer arrests and fatalities like MCITs do. MCITs coupled with CIT-police training will increase the likelihood of people experiencing mental health crises being referred to appropriate non-hospital mental health services instead of being incarcerated (Compton, Bakeman, and Broussard 2014), ultimately improving safety and saving money for the university.

TALKING POINTS

- The chance of a person suffering from untreated mental illness being killed during an encounter with law enforcement is 16 times higher than for others approached by police (Fuller et al. 2015).
- Individuals undergoing a mental health crisis have a higher chance of being confronted by law enforcement than receiving appropriate medical care (National Alliance on Mental Illness).
- People of color are less likely to be identified as having a mental health problem and are less likely to receive adequate treatment once incarcerated (Office of the Surgeon General 2001).
- Black men showing signs of mental illness are also more likely to be shot and killed by police than white men exhibiting similar behaviors (Thomas, Johnson, and Jewel 2020).
- Of the 24,000 CAHOOTS calls received in 2019, police backup was requested only 150 times—less than 1 percent (0.625 percent) (Butler and Sheriff 2020).

Empowering Individuals in the Foster System: Increasing Opportunity Through an Alternative Form of Identification

By Uzair Alpial, Monish Sharma, and Vishal Narla

Roosevelt @ University of Texas at Dallas

THESIS

Individuals recently released from the state foster care system often lack necessary documents to reintegrate into society. To fix this, Texas should create and issue an alternative form of identification for individuals aging out of the foster system.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Alumni of the foster care system are in great need of government assistance: The National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that over 20.1 percent of individuals aging out of state custody face immediate poverty (Pac et al. 2017). Moreover, the rate of foster homelessness within 18 months of emancipation from the foster system has worsened from 18 percent in 1995 to 45 percent in recent years (O'Neale n.d.). Since 1992, unemployment after leaving the foster system has increased by 15 percent (DOL 2020). In fact, within four years of aging out of the system, the annual income of foster alumni is only \$7,500, and over 53 percent have no earnings (iFoster 2020).

Foster alumni require targeted aid, which the Texas government does administer. However, a majority of people aging out of the foster system cannot access these welfare interests. For instance, state law declares that foster alumni should get employment prioritization for jobs, yet 60 percent of them are unemployed (ASPE 2008). Likewise, while current regulations outline free Medicaid and unburdened college grants for them until the age of 26, a third of foster alumni are still uninsured and more than 80 percent never earn a university degree (Wiltz 2017). This is an issue that disproportionately affects minority communities, as 56 percent of foster youths are people of color (Annie E. Casey Foundation n.d.).

To alleviate these difficulties, Chapters 54 and 672 of the Texas Government Code outline the issuance of foster-specific aid (Texas Legislature n.d.a; Texas Legislature n.d.b.). The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) protocols stipulate that these forms of aid can only be accessed upon one's request, but in order for foster alumni to access any government aid or specific aid programs, they must present proof of having been a part of the foster system (DFPS n.d.). Additionally, once an individual presents proof of having been in the foster system, that issuance of proof can only be used to apply for one aid program. Individuals must get a separate document from the DFPS every time they wish to apply to a different aid program.

However, many foster alumni are unaware of this process and do not know how to receive a document that proves they have been in foster care. Moreover, the system is not required to automatically issue proof of identification to people who have been in foster care when they turn 18 (DFPS n.d.). Mary Christine-Reed, Director of the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project (TFYJP), estimates that over 50 percent of foster children are unaware that such a statute to help them obtain aid even exists (TFYJP 2021). Over 1,200 people age out of the state DFPS annually (Murphy 2020), meaning that there are a large number of people who could be helped by easier access to aid.

THE POLICY IDEA

Current Texas DFPS conventions should be amended so that it is compulsory for the agency to issue a general form of identification to all foster children once they turn 18. This document should be a verified certificate that specifies an individual's identity, birthdate, and citizenship. The Texas state legislature, in turn, should move to modify Chapters 54 and 672 of the state code so that this accreditation is recognized as an acceptable form of evidence for foster alumni to access government benefits.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Effective access to government aid would ease many of the challenges faced by foster youth. The TFYJP, which is the foremost foster rights advocacy group in Texas, explained in a phone conversation that current government resources are supposed to minimize poverty rates and socioeconomic disparities among alumni of the foster system. But the director of the program says that the lack of awareness about the details of assistance programs and information about their accessibility makes it difficult for foster youth to receive the aid that they need (TFYJP 2021). Therefore, while mechanisms are in place to assist foster children, they are not attainable enough to be effective: Foster alumni cannot easily benefit from foster-specific aid because they are not properly educated on its presence and the aid itself can only be accessed through a complicated process.

This policy would provide a mechanism through which to help foster alumni have easier access to government aid. While opponents of the proposal might say that it could present monetary burdens for the DFPS or that it might not be feasible, these concerns are unsubstantiated; the information required for a “foster identity certificate” is already present in the agency’s IMPACT database, which can be easily utilized by the system (DFPS n.d.). Therefore, the policy change requires an organizational overhaul rather than increased funds.

Efforts in California show similar conclusions about the necessity of making foster aid more accessible. In 2019, the California House of Representatives proposed SB-912, which highlighted the need to simplify and ease the process for foster alumni to access designated aid (California Legislature 2020b). In 2020, SB-100 was sent to the state Senate and aims to improve education of foster youth regarding the aid programs which are designed for them (California Legislature 2020a). Each of these will be voted on for approval in the coming year, and both fall in line with data indicating that an increased provision of services to foster youth greatly improves their chances of success in the areas of education, housing, employment, and parenthood (Rosenberg 2019).

Automatic provision of identification that can be used to access existing government aid will create a simpler and more straightforward mechanism to help prepare individuals aging out of the system for their future. Increasing access to aid will lead to improvements in the long-term success of people aging out of the foster system—such as increased attainment of higher education, percentages of employment, and rates of housing—and will work towards greatly improving their standard of living for Texas foster alumni.

TALKING POINTS

- Seventy percent of children in foster care exhibit moderate to severe mental health problems, meaning that access to government programs such as Medicaid are imperative for their success after the foster care system (Healio 2016).
- Twenty percent of foster youths will be homeless on the day that they are emancipated from the system (Sorrell 2017).
- It is estimated that nationally, anywhere from 45–65 percent of foster children are never adopted and thus age out of the system without any support structure, increasing their reliance on public benefits (O’Neale n.d.).

Expanding Ballot Access in Massachusetts through Permanent Implementation of Vote-by-Mail and All-Mail Elections

By Richard Li

Roosevelt @ Northeastern University

THESIS

To reduce voting disparities for historically underrepresented communities—racial minorities, younger voters, those experiencing poverty, and those who lack access to education—the Massachusetts state legislature and executive branch should implement permanent vote-by-mail (VBM) options for elections. They should also go a step further and administer all-mail voting for future elections, which would mean that the state would automatically mail ballots to all voters and conduct elections mostly—although not necessarily entirely—through VBM.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Despite the 1870 passage of the Fifteenth Amendment—which prohibited the federal government and states from denying individuals the right to vote based on race—states continued to enact poll taxes, implement literacy tests, intimidate would-be voters, and practice other racially discriminatory voter-suppression maneuvers in the following decades. These voter suppression tactics have particularly harmed Black Americans (Library of Congress n.d.). In 1965, Congress reacted by passing the landmark Voting Rights Act (VRA), creating new provisions for how to regulate elections, and—more importantly—reinforced the voting rights guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment (Amar-Dolan 2014). Among the key additions was Section 5, which required certain jurisdictions with discriminatory histories to submit proposed election changes to the US Department of Justice or to district courts in Washington, DC before they could go into effect. However, the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* ruled that Section 4(b) of the VRA, which determined the jurisdictions covered by Section 5, was unconstitutional. Without a coverage formula to enact Section 5, the ruling blunted many of the VRA's intentions and accelerated the legal development of modern voter suppression tactics (Brennan Center for Justice 2018). Strict registration restrictions, photo ID laws, voter purges, felony disenfranchisement, and gerrymandering still prevent Black individuals and other individuals of color from participating in the electoral process (ACLU 2020).

Various historical analyses, including a 2014 report from the Center for American Progress, have concluded that disadvantaged communities continue to suffer from a stark disparity in ballot access compared to more privileged ones due to the voter suppression tactics previously mentioned (Fulwood 2014). Similar low voter turnout trends have been observed nationwide for young voters and voters of lower socioeconomic status (US Census Bureau n.d.).

Before 2020, the only allowed form of VBM in Massachusetts was excuse-approved absentee ballots (Office of William Francis Galvin n.d.). However, in July 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State House passed Bill H. 4820, temporarily allowing all voters to apply for mail-in ballots without excuse (The 192nd General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts n.d.).

This experiment demonstrated the effectiveness of a strong VBM program (Stout 2021): According to Secretary of State William Galvin's office, Massachusetts experienced higher voter turnout across the board in 2020, in nearly every demographic, largely facilitated by the new VBM method (Fox 2020). However, H. 4820 expired on March 31, 2021, and the return to pre-2020 restrictions presents a major voting rights issue and risks undoing the significant progress made toward increased democratic access.

THE POLICY IDEA

Voting determines who holds elected office and thus who controls policy agendas. Wider ballot access for voters of color, younger voters, those experiencing poverty, and those who lack access to education will allow these populations to have more say in the areas of policy that impact their lives and well-being, providing lasting influence on health care, education, criminal justice, and more. The Massachusetts state legislature, Governor Baker, and Secretary Galvin therefore have a responsibility to their constituents to pass legislation certifying VBM as a permanent method of voting and move toward all-mail elections.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Many nonvoters are often young, less affluent, less educated, or members of minority groups (Pew Research Center 2014). These realities make sense; those who are poorer, for example, must often prioritize economic obligations over civic ones, and those who lack access to education may be less politically informed (Fulwood 2014). All-mail elections encourage civic engagement among a wide range of constituents, including college-age students and working single parents, who normally face barriers to voting such as time or transportation (Richman and Pate 2010). All-mail voting also allows disadvantaged communities such as those of color to avoid voter suppression tactics by bypassing the election day polls entirely. As a whole, all-mail elections provide greater flexibility and freedom to these voters because they have power over when and where they vote (Chotiner 2020). Through greater access to voting, marginalized populations become able to wield greater influence over the policy agenda to change their political, economic, and social circumstances and improve quality of life.

Claims that VBM, all-mail elections, or other forms of convenience voting have partisan implications (Alvarez, Levin, and Sinclair 2012) or promote ballot fraud are unfounded. A 2020 Stanford study (conducted before the November general election) concluded that VBM does not affect either major party's turnout or vote share, and instead increases turnout rates for both (Thompson et al. 2020). Additionally, the Heritage Foundation's voter fraud database calculated that over the previous 20 years, the potential voter fraud rate in US elections was just 0.00006 percent (McReynolds and Stewart III 2020). Many other organizations and studies have also found the probability of fraud during elections in the past decade to be statistically insignificant (Brennan Center for Justice 2017). Concerns about 2020 ballot fraud continue to be unfounded after the election; former US Attorneys General William Barr (Balsamo 2020) and Jeffrey Rosen (Benner 2021) have stated that the Justice Department found and received no evidence that voter fraud affected the electoral outcome.

California, Nebraska, and New Jersey—three of the many states that mailed ballots to all voters for the first time in 2020—provide examples of how all-mail elections improve voter turnout among marginalized demographics. All three states noted their highest turnouts in decades—California since 1952 (CA Sec of State n.d.), Nebraska since 1968 (Ruggles 2020), and New Jersey in recorded history (Wildstein 2021). This is not a 2020-specific phenomenon; Washington state, which passed VBM as a permanent voting option in 2005, and completed the transition to all-mail elections in 2011, recorded 51 percent turnout in the four midterm elections between 2006 and 2018—up from 45 percent during the four midterm elections before 2006. According to a review by McClatchy, this upward turnout trend was consistent among Washington's voters of color, who voted more often in 2020 than they did 15 years before, at the time most counties made the switch to all-mail elections (Sailor and Reese 2020).

In addition to expanding access to voting, all-mail elections also offer administrative benefits, as the reduced need to recruit, train, and organize poll workers leads to more time and resource flexibility (Hernandez 2014). In fact, Oregon (Montjoy 2010), Washington, and Colorado (Pew Charitable Trusts 2016)—the first three states to allow universal all-mail voting—have consistently enjoyed 30–50 percent lower administrative costs since switching (Trenchard 2011).

On March 16, 2021, Vermont—one of the states that switched to all-mail voting during the 2020 election—passed a bill to adopt universal mail voting permanently for future election cycles. It is the first state since the election to embrace the move toward all-mail elections. Officials in Massachusetts are also interested in this move; Secretary Galvin vouched for the permanent implementation of VBM because “it allows the voting to be done at the convenience of the voter, it extends to voters more time, [and] more reason. It will, in effect, add people to the discussion, which is a very important thing” (Brooks 2021). If Massachusetts were to go even further and adopt all-mail elections, it would join Vermont in providing more states with another model to follow.

TALKING POINTS

- In the 2016 general election, there was a 9.8 percent lower turnout among voters of color than the national average turnout of 60.2 percent. There was also a 16.8 percent lower turnout among voters ages 18–29, and a 20.4 percent lower turnout of voters without a college degree (United States Election Project n.d.).
- Despite a 74.7 percent overall voter turnout in Massachusetts for the 2016 general election, turnout among voters of color—who account for 17.8 percent of the eligible voter population—was only 63.3 percent while their vote share was only 12.7 percent (Mass Voter Table 2018).
- In 2020, 70 percent of Americans, 79 percent of Black voters, 79 percent of Hispanic voters, and 80 percent of voters ages 18–29 supported allowing any voter to vote by mail if they wanted to (Pew Research Center 2020).
- Ten states and Washington, DC observed mostly or all VBM elections in 2020. Those eleven regions enjoyed an average turnout increase of 9.2 percent from 2016 versus an average 5.9 percent increase across the other 40 states (DeSilver 2021).
- Between the 2020 general election and February 2021, 11 states have introduced a total of 27 bills that would legalize VBM for all voters in all future elections (Brennan Center for Justice 2021).

Improving Health in South Los Angeles by Reducing Local Oil Development

By Pratik Thakur

Roosevelt @ University of Southern California

THESIS

South Los Angeles residents face health complications from air pollutants emitted by local oil wells. To reduce health risks, the LA County Public Health Department should fund low-cost air quality sensors to detect pollution rates and prohibit oil development when pollutants reach levels above what the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

There have been oil fields in Los Angeles for over 100 years (Shamasunder 2018a). Although the oil industry's prominence in the city has declined, LA still ranks in the nation's top 10 most polluted cities, and 580,000 Los Angelenos, around 5.7 percent of the county's population, still live less than a quarter of a mile away from an active oil well (STAND-L.A. n.d.a; United States Census Bureau n.d.). Overall, the City of Los Angeles, home to over 4 million people, still has around 850 active oil and gas wells, and the larger Los Angeles County (with a population of 10 million) has approximately 4750 wells (Shamasunder et al. 2018b). Around 70 percent of active oil wells in the city are within 1500 feet of community areas like homes, urban parks, and schools (Shamasunder et al. 2018b). Residents in these areas suffer dangers due to poor air quality from their proximity to oil wells; for example, wells emit toxic chemicals such as benzene and n-hexane, which are carcinogenic and pose other health risks (Garcia-Gonzales, Shamasunder, and Jerrett 2019). Moreover, other chemicals from wells, such as methane, damage the local air quality and lead to a higher prevalence of respiratory problems like asthma (Shamasunder et al. 2018b).

These dangers are unevenly distributed—many oil fields in South LA are built in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. For example, the AllenCo oil well site is located in the University Park neighborhood, where around 76 percent of residents are Latinx and 72 percent are 200 percent below the poverty line (Shamasunder et al. 2018b). The University Park neighborhood and West Adams neighborhood, where the Jefferson oil well is located, are classified by the California government mapping tool CalEnviroScreen as “environmental justice” communities—that is, in the top 25 percent of most environmentally burdened census tracts statewide. There is also evidence of health problems in these neighborhoods linked to oil production. In 2013, University Park residents reported headaches, respiratory issues, and nosebleeds, corresponding to a 400 percent increase in oil production at the AllenCo field that year (Shamasunder et al. 2018b).

In order to combat the risks of these pollutants, community members and officials have tried to reduce the number of oil wells. For instance, the city forced the Jefferson oil field, which was within 1000 feet of residences, a church, and an elementary school, to terminate and clean up its operations in 2019 (Shamasunder et al. 2020; STAND-L.A. n.d.b). Still, such initiatives are difficult to execute due to opposition from oil companies like Freeport McMoRan, which have a stake in oil fields in the South LA area (yet do not even have extensive tracking systems for oil-related activity) (STAND-L.A. n.d.a). Furthermore, air monitoring can be expensive, making it difficult for communities to access necessary data for these efforts (Shamasunder et al. 2018b). The lack of specific data and monitoring of oil well air pollution makes it more difficult for municipalities and organizations to demonstrate the associated dangers and work to limit their production. However, the dangers of air pollutants to the health of local populations mean that it is crucial to create and enforce limitations on oil development (American Lung Association 2020).

THE POLICY IDEA

The County of Los Angeles Public Health Department should fund and install low-cost air pollution sensors in South Los Angeles to track how oil development in the area increases the rate of air pollutants emitted into the environment. This new sensor program will help South Los Angeles' underserved populations, as greater data collection will bring more awareness, evidence, and support for the government to limit and/or forbid oil development once air pollutants reach levels determined by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to be dangerous and unhealthy.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Employing sensors will standardize the detection of air pollutants and chemicals (such as benzene and n-hexane) from oil wells. These oil pollution rates can then be added to the California Department of Conservation's online well-finder, which maintains a list of state oil wells (California Department of Conservation n.d.). With more detailed, real-time information about oil well pollutants, organizations like STAND-LA, a Los Angeles community group that organizes against local neighborhood drilling, can present a stronger case to local officials to remove oil fields and improve community health.

These sensors, usually known as U-Pods or Y-Pods, are small, easy to employ, and not very expensive—they can cost as little as \$500. On the other hand, air pollution has cost California \$28 billion annually (Collier-Oxandale et al. 2020; California State University, Fullerton 2008), in part due to worse community health and premature deaths, which have a negative impact on the potential economic output that these individuals could have contributed if they were healthy and productive (California State University, Fullerton 2008). Additionally, health care expenditures such as the costs from emergency room and hospital visits due to air pollution in California have amounted to over \$193 million in the two-year period from 2005–2007 (Romley, Hackbarth, and Goldman 2010). Consequently, in addition to having a positive impact on community health, efforts to limit air pollution will also decrease health care costs and financially benefit the economy.

Increased data collection has already proven to be successful at decreasing harmful oil production: As mentioned previously, in 2019, researchers and local residents in the West Adams area set up sensors to collect data about air pollutants from the Jefferson oil well site (Shamasunder et al. 2020). Eventually, this data provided enough evidence to highlight the field's dangers, leading city officials to close down the site (Shamasunder et al. 2020). However, these kinds of bans are not common. This example was made possible through a substantial community-led initiative, aided by extra data collection and recording. A more comprehensive system to detect unsafe levels of harmful oil air pollutants would therefore help future similar community-led initiatives. Eventually, these kinds of pollutant detection systems can be extended to both city and state-wide initiatives to close down oil fields, since there is already a list of all the oil wells in California that could be made more robust through the inclusion of pollution rates.

Stakeholders in the oil industry, such as Freeport McMoRan which has had previous controversies with its business in South LA, may also argue that shutting down wells will hurt the economy (Reyes 2015). However, California plans to transition away from the use of fossil fuels, for example by only allowing the sale of zero-emission passenger vehicles by 2035 (Office of Governor Newsom 2020). Limiting and closing oil development in LA will therefore go along with the substantive policies being made toward a greener economy in the state.

TALKING POINTS

- Around 580,000 Los Angeles County residents—5.7 percent of the total population—live less than a quarter of a mile away from an active oil well (STAND-LA. n.d.a; United States Census Bureau n.d.).
- Oil development within South Los Angeles endangers the health of residents because it emits toxic and carcinogenic pollutants and further contributes to socioeconomic hardships faced by the primarily low-income and minority populations who live near oil wells (Shamasunder et al. 2018; Garcia-Gonzales, Shamasunder, and Jerrett 2019).
- Developing a comprehensive method to track oil field sites and their pollution rates will provide valuable evidence to disrupt the continuation of oil development in the South Los Angeles area (Shamasunder et al. 2020).

Ending Parking Minimums in Boston to Improve Livability

By Rachael Burstein

Roosevelt @ Northeastern University

THESIS

The city of Boston requires that developers provide a large number of parking spaces with new developments—often more than necessary—which wastes valuable space, reduces housing affordability, encourages car ownership, and perpetuates the climate crisis. As such, Boston should end parking minimums to preserve space for more sustainable uses.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Parking minimums are laws imposed by municipalities that require developers to include a certain number of off-street parking spaces for residential and commercial developments. Municipalities began implementing parking minimums in the 1920s to prevent businesses from competing with nearby residents for on-street parking; this move also required housing developments to provide parking for their residents, and gave businesses ample parking for their customers (Mancini Nichols 2019). Although many business owners and renters tout the importance of large parking lots, over 30 percent of parking lots sit empty in the Boston inner-core subregion, even during peak hours when they should be at their fullest (MAPC 2019). Evidence also shows that parking spaces have many negative impacts: They increase car dependence, worsen climate change impacts, and make cities less livable.

Having large numbers of parking lots encourages car use, which leads to increased congestion, air and noise pollution, and environmental justice issues (A Better City 2016). For example, communities of color disproportionately face negative impacts from higher levels of car usage, like poorer air quality caused by diesel fumes. On average, air breathed by Asian American, African American, and Latinx residents in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions of the US is 66 percent more polluted than that breathed by their white counterparts, causing more health issues among these populations (Moura and Reichmuth 2019). Furthermore, excess paved surfaces worsen the urban heat island effect, raising the temperature in cities (Shyduroff 2019). Certain groups, like outdoor workers, the elderly, and low-income populations are especially vulnerable to extreme heat due to unequal exposure to high temperatures, health issues, and less access to heat mitigation infrastructure (CDC 2017). Higher numbers of cars also leads to more carbon emissions, and all residents will suffer if the city fails to mitigate climate change impacts.

Moreover, parking spaces are expensive to construct and maintain, priced at around \$21,000 per structure parking space (not including additional maintenance). Developers often offset this cost by raising rents (A Better City 2016), which especially hurts those who are less likely to own cars—specifically individuals with lower incomes, the elderly and young adults, or people with disabilities—as their rents increase to pay for others' car use (Chan et al. 2016).

THE POLICY IDEA

Given the negative effects and lack of utility of parking minimums, Boston should end parking minimums for new developments. The existing policy adversely impacts renters and developers, as well as urban livability and the environment. With less space taken up by parking lots and garages, Boston can dedicate more space to public goods like bike lanes and green space, or new housing and businesses. If Boston ends its parking minimums, it would become the second city in the United States to do so, acting as a trailblazer and likely inspiring other municipalities to follow suit.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Many city and transportation planners now understand that parking supply is a self-reinforcing problem: the more parking spaces supplied by the city, the more residents and businesses demand. Increased parking availability sways car users to take advantage of such spaces, whether for overnight parking at their place of residence or at the businesses they frequent (MAPC 2019). The availability of parking spaces therefore discourages people from biking, walking, or taking public transit. Unfortunately, this trend is worsening in Boston. From 2009 to 2014, car ownership in the city increased from an average of .77 vehicles per household to .92 (MA RMV N.d.). Furthermore, construction of parking lots and garages far outpaces the actual need—as mentioned earlier, more than 30 percent of Boston's parking spaces are vacant during peak hours (MAPC 2019). With a parking supply better fit to demand, this land could instead be used for new parks, bike lanes, or additional housing units.

Reining in Boston's parking supply will also mitigate climate change impacts and improve affordability by reducing car use and the harmful impacts that come with it. (MassDOT 2019). There are many positive externalities to people becoming less dependent on their cars: air is cleaner, neighborhoods are quieter, and more space is made available for other kinds of development; in other words, cities become much more pleasant places to live. With fewer empty parking lots, Boston can provide more parks, sidewalks, and bike lanes, which all contribute to urban livability and promote sustainability.

Businesses may oppose ending parking minimums for fear that fewer customers will visit their establishments. However, a study by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) used case studies across New York City to measure how improvements to street environments can impact business by comparing sales tax receipts before and after project implementation. The study concluded that businesses typically overestimate how many customers drive to their establishments. Furthermore, customers arriving on bike or foot actually make more frequent trips to such businesses, and purchase less per trip but more overall compared to drivers. A more comfortable pedestrian environment is good for business, as it increases foot traffic and retail activity (NYC DOT 2013).

TALKING POINTS

- Parking lots are underutilized in the Boston inner-core subregion, with about 30 percent of spaces sitting empty during peak hours (MAPC 2019).
- Parking lots incentivize car use and therefore contribute to the ongoing climate crisis as well as to pollution, congestion, and the urban heat island effect.
- The construction of parking lots and garages is very expensive—about \$21,000 per structure parking space—which prolongs project completion and ultimately drives up rent for residents (A Better City 2016).
- Empty parking lots waste valuable space that the city could otherwise designate for more productive uses, such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and green spaces.
- The provision of parking spaces is self-reinforcing: the more parking supply is provided by the city, the more residents and businesses want. Therefore, if Boston doesn't stop providing parking where it's not needed, empty parking spaces and their externalities will continue to burden communities.

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