

HOW **WE** RISE

HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS IN CHARLOTTE IMPACT ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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BROOKINGS

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, featuring a prominent, modern skyscraper with a dark, angular facade on the left. The city is densely packed with various buildings, and the foreground shows a large, open area that appears to be under development or a parking lot. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds.

HOW WE RISE

How We Rise is a project from The Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative at The Brookings Institution that focuses on the importance of social capital and social connections to economic mobility and the policy solutions that intentionally focus on the social network determinants of economic mobility and equity.

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HOW WE RISE Charlotte

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Charlotte, North Carolina, is a city rich with opportunities, but those opportunities are not equitably shared. In 2014, Charlotte placed 50th out of 50 in a ranking of cities for upward mobility. Now the city aspires to be a horizon community, one where all can rise. Social networks, providing access to support, information, power and resources, are a critical and often neglected element of opportunity structures. Social capital matters for mobility.

We analyzed over 30,000 interpersonal network configurations in the city, drawing on rich data from 177 representative residents of Charlotte. These networks were then evaluated for size (i.e., number of people), breadth (i.e., range of connection types, such as familial or professional) and strength (i.e., the value of connection as a source of assistance). We compared social networks by demographic group, especially race, income, and gender. In particular, we assessed networks in terms of their value for access to opportunities and resources in three domains: jobs, education and housing.

Our main empirical findings on social networks are as follows:

- ***Social networks are strongly homogenous across demographic categories, especially by race. Black respondents have largely Black networks. Most striking, most whites have networks composed only of other whites.***
- ***Information and resources associated with social networks therefore largely flow within racial groups rather than between racial groups. This reflects in part the high levels of residential and educational segregation in the city.***
- ***The character of social networks varies by race and gender. Whites see the greatest advantages. White men benefit from the richest pool of social capital, with a large, broad, and strong set of connections, including multiple professional contacts, family members, and personal associates. The networks of white women are not quite as valuable as for white men—though they do report good access to financial support.***
- ***Black women and especially Black men have less social capital than whites overall. Black women have larger networks than Black men, able to count on several people for support, information, advice, and mentoring—but these connections are not as strong for whites. For both Black women and men, access to financial support through social networks is much lower than for whites.***
- ***Black men in Charlotte have especially weak networks. In fact, Black men typically rely on just one person for tangible support when exploring employment, educational, or housing opportunities.***
- ***The networks of Latinos are also small and relatively narrow and particularly reliant on family members. Of all the groups we analyzed, overall, Latinas (Hispanic women) are the least networked in Charlotte.***
- ***Whites report high levels of assistance from parents, especially financial support in relation to housing opportunities. Blacks receive only modest financial support from mothers, and none from fathers. Similarly, Latinos did not generally report assistance from parents.***

- *Overall, we find that fathers play an important supporting role for whites, but a much smaller role for Latinos, and are able to provide no real support to either Black men or Black women.*

- *Assessing social networks by income, we find that middle-income residents have the broadest networks, compared to more affluent or poorer residents. But there is an important difference at the tails in terms of network strength. Higher-income respondents had fewer people in their networks, but those contacts were highly reliable for information, advice, networking, and for providing references. At the top of the economic ladder, social networks are small but strong.*

- *We note that these differences by income overlap strongly with the race gaps described above, since the median income of whites is twice that of Black and Latino households in Charlotte.*

- *Most social connections were formed in educational institutions (schools and colleges) or in the workplace. This highlights the connection between institutional settings and access and the accumulation of social capital. Exclusion from institutions means exclusion from opportunities to build valuable connections.*

The sharp divides in social capital contribute to Charlotte's underperformance in terms of

social mobility. The role of intergenerational networks is an especially stark illustration of broader inequalities: White wealth and support consistently cascade down the generations; not so for Blacks and Latinos.

But these social capital gaps do not emerge out of thin air. They are, to a large extent, the result of specific policy choices. We offer a brief, critical assessment of trends in housing policy, education policy, and criminal justice and policing.

- *Charlotte's neighborhoods are strongly segregated by race (it is the 37th most segregated city in the U.S.), and notably, unlike most cities, it has seen no decline in the level of segregation in recent years.*

- *The public schools in Charlotte are also segregated by race, following a series of policy shifts. The segregation of Black and white elementary school students has in fact, been rising over recent decades.*

- *Black boys are much more likely to be excluded from school than whites. In 2012, Black boys accounted for 20,090 short-term suspensions, compared to 2,643 for white boys.*

- *Black men also face much higher rates of incarceration. In Charlotte, Black men are almost 10 times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. Black male unemployment rates are also twice that for white men.*



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These trends result from specific policy choices made, or policy choices avoided. To a large extent, the social networks of Charlotte residents reflect and reinforce the inequities in housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. We focus in particular on the multiple injustices faced by Black males, and conclude that in Charlotte there is not only underinvestment, but specific, aggressive disinvestment in Black boys.

What is to be done? We do not offer a blueprint for building social capital, but suggest some potential paths forward for the city. Most important, three commitments must be made by Charlotte's civic, business, and political leaders:

- ***Candidly engage with the racial dynamics of the city.***
- ***Work collaboratively across racial lines to identify who is accountable for equity goals.***
- ***Identify and execute on policy areas where the greatest racial equity gains can be achieved in the next 3-5 years.***

As a result of authentically acting on these commitments, a series of policy goals and approaches could emerge. The city could, for example:

- ***Set a goal to drive down school suspension and incarceration rates among blacks compared to those of whites.***
- ***Develop a racial equity plan for Charlotte that articulates measurable, highly impactful equity goals.***
- ***Transition away from a juvenile justice system and school suspensions.***
- ***Support young Black and Latina mothers, measuring success by rates of maternal mortality.***
- ***Invest heavily in a college savings account for all kindergartners in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), and make additional payments for lower-income students over time.***

Most importantly, these equity goals should be driven by those who are least advantaged. Charlotte's divisions, not least in social networks, reflect choices made in the past; choices that today's leaders and residents in Charlotte can and should make differently in order to create a true horizon community.

This report is part of The Brookings Institution's How We Rise project, a larger series of research and analysis that helps to explain the dynamics of social connections and the policy solutions that intentionally focus on the social network determinants of economic mobility and equity.





INTRODUCTION

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Charlotte, North Carolina, aspires to be a horizon community, a place where investments and policy decisions provide its residents with resources sufficient to reach their aspirations and to cushion their falls. In many ways, the city has the outlines of a vibrant, high-performing society. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Charlotte's low overall unemployment rate, diversified economy, growing tax base, and increasing population all indicated a picture of economic vitality.

At odds with Charlotte's reputation for vibrancy was a 2014 report generated by the Opportunity Insights team at Harvard University that compared intergenerational economic mobility—that is, the likelihood that a poor child could end up more prosperous than his/her parents—across 50 metro areas in the U.S.¹ That report ranked Charlotte last, leading to the conclusion that, in spite of its considerable economic development successes, the fruits of those economic development choices accrue disproportionately to those who are already advantaged in Charlotte.

Social capital is a vital but under-examined part of the mobility story. Horizon societies

make intentional policy decisions that allow the free flow of social capital and resources across differences in the population, most notably across ethnic and income divisions. For Charlotte's leaders, it has been challenging to achieve the type of free flow of social capital and resources consistent with a horizon society. Yet, civic leaders in Charlotte have, in recent years, launched several efforts in the educational and social capital spaces to attempt to address the more glaring disparities in life outcomes between communities in Charlotte. These nascent investments reflect an acknowledgment that there are social dimensions to the economic mobility dynamics in Charlotte that have not been directly addressed earlier.

Can these efforts help create a horizon community in Charlotte? They are more likely to succeed if Charlotte's leaders and residents understand the dynamics of social networks in the city, and the ways in which those networks allow individuals to marshal and exchange social capital and resources. That is the goal of this report.





BROOKINGS SOCIAL NETWORKS RESEARCH

BROOKINGS

In an effort to understand why the economic mobility—and in turn, the horizon profile—of Charlotte is so poor, the Brookings Institution team, under a grant from The Gambrell Foundation, undertook a study in 2019-2020 that documented how social relationships help illuminate a tale of two cities in Charlotte: one prosperous, and the other deeply constrained. The project was formulated to ask: What do social networks look like for people in Charlotte, and how do they provide access to job, education, and housing opportunities?

Brookings undertook in-depth qualitative research, asking a representative sample of 177 Charlotte residents in extensive, one-on-one interviews about their social relationships with regard to job, educational, and housing opportunities. We asked who they knew who could provide assistance in these specific areas, what types of assistance these contacts could provide, and whether these contacts actually did provide that assistance. We asked about how frequently they were in contact with the

people they identified, how our interview participants met each of their contacts, and the demographic profiles of each of their contacts.

What emerged was a rich and deeply interesting tapestry that explains how social connections are made, leveraged, and nurtured in Charlotte. Our database contains anonymized information on over 30,000 personal social network configurations across a range of demographic profiles in Charlotte, mapped to understand the dynamics of social networks in Charlotte and their relationships to economic mobility.

We assessed these networks along three dimensions—size, breadth of types of contacts, and strength/reliability.

What we found was that access to jobs, education, and housing opportunities in Charlotte is a story of race, gender, and income, with racial dimensions playing the most significant role in the dynamics of social networks in Charlotte.

NETWORK DEFINITIONS

NETWORK SIZE	Network size refers to the number of people in a participant's network and we refer to them as large or small/sparse.
NETWORK BREADTH	Network breadth refers to types of contacts in the networks –professional, familial, friends. Networks that include all three types of contacts are broad. Those that do not, are narrow networks.
STRENGTH	Strength, which we also refer to as reliability means that the participant frequently cites that contact as the person s/he goes to for specific assistance and the assistance is provided.



SOCIAL NETWORKS IN CHARLOTTE ARE HIGHLY RACIALIZED

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We asked our participants who was in their employment, educational, and housing networks, what role these connections played in accessing opportunities, and how similar to, or different from, the participant these connections were.

In our study, we found that Charlotte residents are most likely to associate with someone like themselves. This is true across age, income, gender, and race—but the racial homogeneity of networks in our study is particularly stark (Figure 1).

The majority of white residents in Charlotte who participated in our study had networks composed only of whites. A significant percentage of Black residents in our study also had mostly Black networks, but that percentage was less than the percentage of whites who only had whites in their networks.

Latinos, Southeast Asians, and other racial

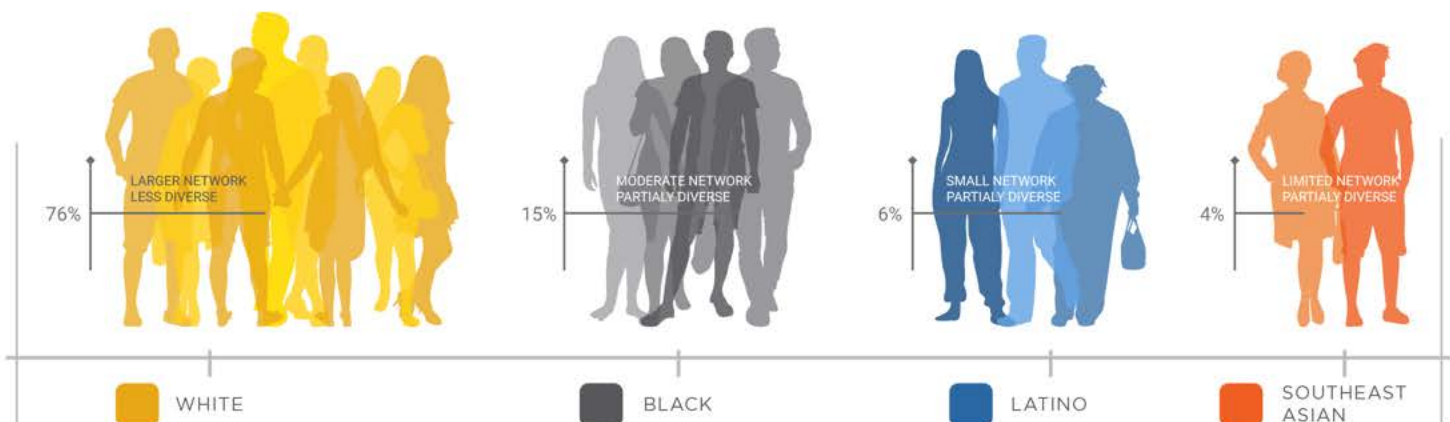
or ethnic groups also had networks that mostly looked like themselves, although they were likely to have more people of other racial groups in those networks than were Blacks and whites in Charlotte.

The most important conclusion about the character of social networks in Charlotte is that those social networks are highly racialized. Information and resources associated with social networks largely flow within racial groups rather than between racial groups.

The strong racial homogeneity in social networks in Charlotte reflects a range of public policy choices made over the last few decades that have essentially maintained spatial racial segregation in Charlotte. Those public policy choices are most evident in housing and educational policies, and we review those here to illustrate the importance of public policy choices for social network dynamics.

The majority of white residents in Charlotte who participated in our study had networks composed only of whites.

FIGURE 1: Charlotte Residents Associate With People Who Are Like Them





SOCIAL NETWORKS IN CHARLOTTE: POLICY-DRIVEN RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

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Although there have been changes over the last decade, housing policies have maintained segregated residential patterns in Charlotte. Importantly for our study, those racial segregation patterns are similar to the homogeneity evident in our social network data. In other words, social segregation mirrors spatial segregation.

Overall, on a national scale, racial residential segregation has declined over the past 50 years.² But despite the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 and the declaration in the 1980s that restrictive zoning laws were unconstitutional, patterns of residential segregation are still markedly prevalent in the

greater Charlotte area. The most common measure of segregation is the dissimilarity index (with 0 indicating the lowest level of segregation and 100 being the highest). This index shows, in effect, what share of one racial group would have to move to another neighborhood in order to achieve a uniform distribution of races across a city. The results shown in Figure 2 below indicate that white segregation values are still hovering in the 50s in the Charlotte area (ranked as the 37th most segregated metropolitan area) and have barely changed between 2000 and 2013-2017.

FIGURE 2: Black/White Segregation in U.S. Metro Areas (2000 and 2013-2017)³

Reference: The Bookings Institution, 2018

Rank	Metropolitan Area*	Percent Black	Black-White Segregation Index**		
			'00	'13-'17	Difference
31.	Sacramento--Roseville--Arden-Arcade, CA	7%	57.9	57.2	-0.6
32.	Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	15%	60.0	56.8	-3.2
33.	Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	8%	60.4	55.2	-5.2
34.	Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	11%	64.6	54.8	-9.7
35.	Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro--Franklin, TN	15%	56.9	54.2	-2.8
36.	Jacksonville, FL	21%	53.9	53.7	-0.1
37.	Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC	22%	52.0	53.1	1.1
38.	San Diego-Carlsbad, CA	5%	55.5	52.2	-3.3
39.	Richmond, VA	30%	54.8	52.1	-2.7
40.	Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	5%	52.4	51.6	-0.9
41.	Oklahoma City, OK	10%	55.3	51.4	-3.9
42.	Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA	3%	51.8	51.3	-0.6
43.	Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford, FL	15%	55.9	49.8	-6.0
44.	Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ	5%	45.1	49.2	4.2
45.	Austin-Round Rock, TX	7%	52.1	49.1	-3.0
46.	San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX	6%	52.8	49.1	-3.7
47.	Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC	30%	46.3	47.3	1.0
48.	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	7%	46.8	46.4	-0.4
49.	Tucson, AZ	3%	39.7	43.5	3.7
50.	Raleigh, NC	20%	40.8	42.2	1.4

The stubborn continuity of racial segregation in Charlotte serves as an important template for social networks in the city, particularly for Black and white residents. Residential segregation has also affected the residential patterns of Latinos in Charlotte; researchers have found that Latino/white segregation actually increased in the Charlotte metro area by about 16% between 1990 and 2000.⁴

Moreover, during the same period, Latino/white segregation levels have surpassed those between Latino and Black residents in Charlotte, suggesting that either Latinos are moving into areas with significant Black populations where they can secure more affordable housing opportunities, and/or whites are leaving those suburbs where there is an increase in

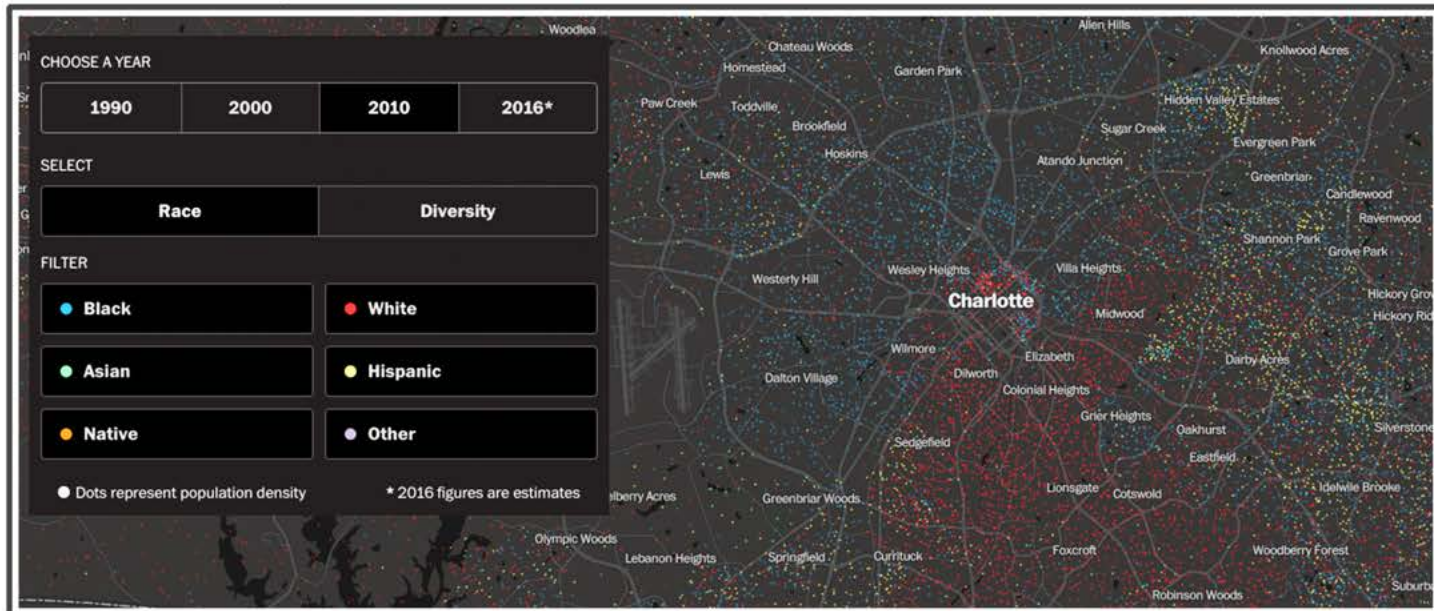
the Latino population. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while Latino/white segregation has steadily increased in Charlotte, it is still low relative to historical Black/white segregation levels, which have persisted at a higher degree for decades. In sum, Charlotte's residential segregation patterns can be attributed to a range of policy choices, including restrictive zoning laws, structural barriers to education, housing policies, and more.

Charlotte continues to be residentially segregated, and that segregation establishes a blueprint for the homogeneity of social networks in Charlotte relative to employment, education, and housing opportunities—all of which is reflected in the results of our study. (Figures 3 and 4)



FIGURE 3: Charlotte Racial Segregation (2010) ⁵

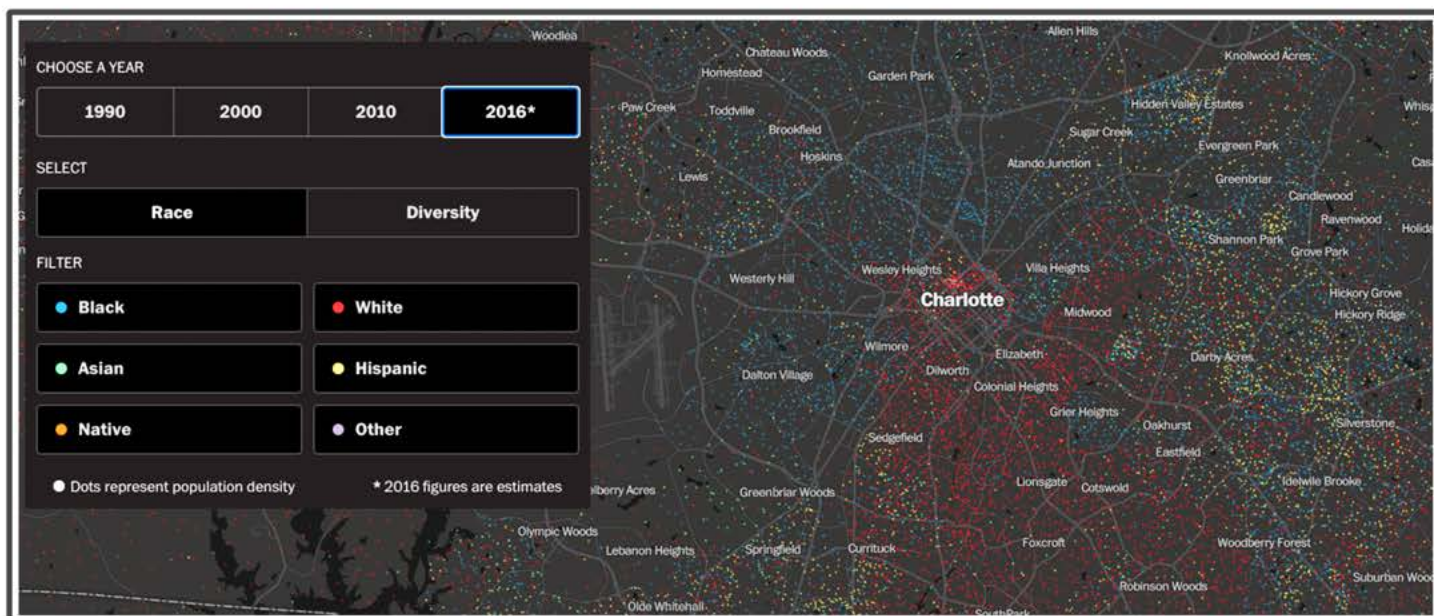
Reference: The Washington Post, 2018



The stubborn continuity of racial segregation in Charlotte serves as an important template for social networks in the city, particularly for Black and white residents.

FIGURE 4: Charlotte Racial Segregation (2016) ⁶

Reference: The Washington Post, 2018





SOCIAL NETWORKS & EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN CHARLOTTE

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In addition to housing policies that have maintained segregated residential patterns in Charlotte, the social dynamics of racial homogeneity in our study also align with educational policies undertaken in Charlotte from the 1980s to the present.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is the public school district in the Charlotte metropolitan area. While it has achieved some success in the pursuit of educational equality, its overall policy record has been mixed.

To assess the historical impact of the district's reforms in closing the achievement gap and addressing spatial segregation, we evaluated policy interventions over a roughly 40-year period beginning in the early 1980s. We detail the resulting impact on key spatial and academic outcomes by using the following three major phases of the district's reforms: 1) federally mandated desegregation initiatives in the 1980s; 2) the phased implementation of public school choice and accountability-based plans during the 1990s; 3) the full adoption of race-neutral, choice-based programs and the recent shift toward equity-based reforms. These outcomes are important because they have a direct influence on the flow of social capital across social networks in Charlotte.

EARLY 1980s

During the early 1970s and 1980s, following the pivotal 1971 Supreme Court ruling (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*), Charlotte emerged as a national pioneer for racial integration in public school education, employing a widely acclaimed mandatory-busing policy to ensure that all students received a quality education irrespective of race.⁷

1990s & 2000s

However, in the midst of a booming economy & growing public pushback over an influx of migrants and racial minorities, CMS began to shift from earlier race-conscious policies⁸ toward more quasi-race-neutral and performance-based changes. In 1992, a semi-public school-choice program around magnet schools was introduced, reducing the number of students involved in mandatory busing and applying an allotted quota of white and Black pupils. Subsequently, increasing public discontent and a subsequent sharp reversal of the *Swann* ruling in 1997 led the North Carolina courts to declare CMS a unitary system, ending the recognition of the state as a two-track system with separate Black and white schools. As a result, the explicit use of race in its assignment plans were removed. A more fully-fledged, color-blind school-choice program, called the "Family Choice Plan," was implemented in 2002, "guaranteeing students attendance at their neighborhood school and providing transfer options for poor-performing or low-income students at high-performing schools."⁹



ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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During these pivots toward a more choice-based educational system, CMS began to be recognized among the top performing school districts in the country, with achievement scores ranking above its urban counterparts and the national average. For example, in 2011, it was awarded a prize for being a model in urban innovation¹⁰ by Arne Duncan, then serving as secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. And in 2013, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the school district's performance surpassed that of 20 other urban districts.¹¹

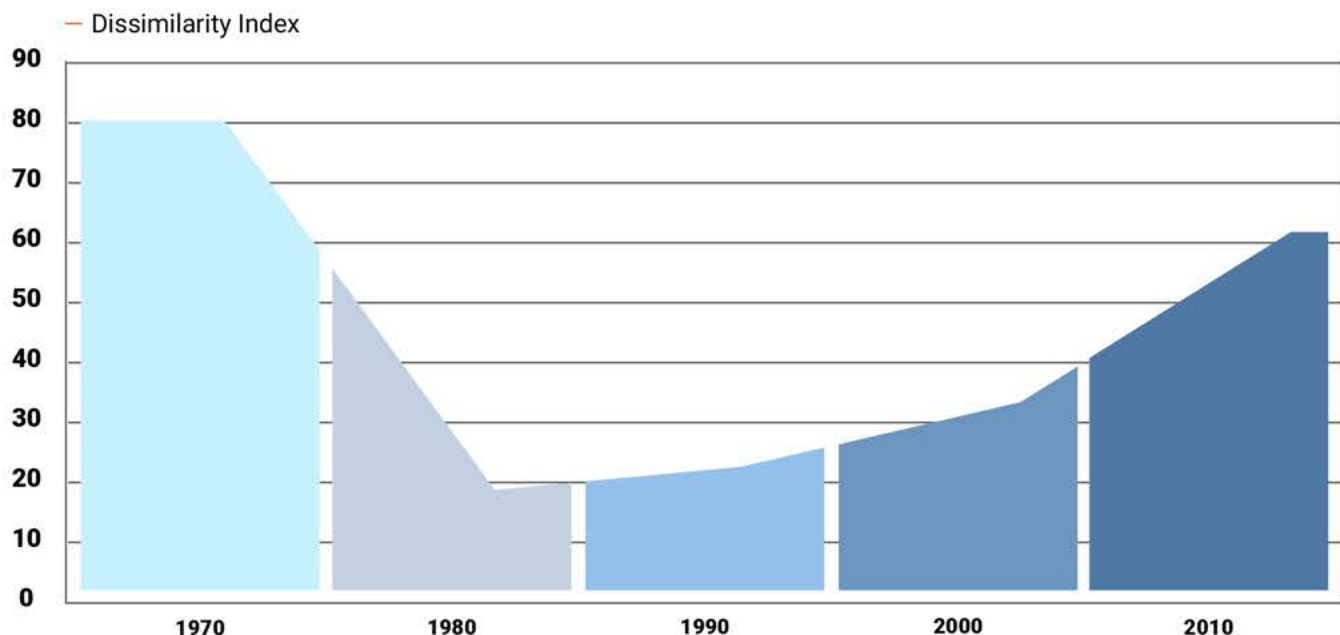
However, researchers have found that even with the enactment of more color-blind reforms, race still played an implicit role in the likelihood of attending a high-quality institution. Instead, color-blind reforms appeared to further exacerbate underlying educational disparities. Low-income and minority (mostly Black) CMS students, relative to white students, faced steeper hurdles in transferring to high-performing

schools. Not only did their lack of familiarity with the complex public school system inhibit their ability to make well-informed choices, but white students, predominantly located in more affluent neighborhoods, were more likely to attend their first choice of high-quality schools. Non-white students, largely concentrated in more destitute neighborhoods, were often excluded from more resource-rich academic settings and were relegated to under-funded schools.

Consequently, Charlotte, which was once regarded as a national emblem for desegregation in education, experienced both a stark increase in racially imbalanced schools and a widening of the achievement gap between majority-white well-off schools and majority non-white, poorly resourced schools. As the data below reveal (Figure 5), a sharp decline in the segregation of Black and white elementary school students can be seen following the implementation of court-ordered desegregation in the 1970s through the 1980s and conversely, a gradual increase in segregation from roughly the 1990s till 2010, following the departure from more race-explicit policies.

FIGURE 5: Black/White Dissimilarity Index: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Elementary Schools (1970-2010)¹²

Reference: Nelson, A. H., Mickelson R. A., & Smith, S. S. (2015).



This return to segregation in the CMS district is important: The overwhelming majority of the evidence¹³ — both specific to the CMS context and in other school districts across the country—points to negative outcomes for minorities¹⁴ tied to increased segregation, even in the midst of greater supplemental resources to high-poverty schools (Figures 6 and 7).

FIGURE 6: Percent of Proficient Students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by Race in Core High School Subjects (1992-1996)¹⁵

Reference: Smith, S. S., & Mickelson, R. A., 2000.

Racial Group	'92-'93	'93-'94	'94-'95	'95-'96
English I				
CMS (Black)	21	19	27	25
CMS (White)	58	57	71	68
NC(Black)	22	21	25	27
NC (White)	51	50	60	61
Forsyth (Black)	24	20	31	28
Forsyth (White)	59	59	70	71
Wake (Black)	23	25	31	31
Wake (White)	61	63	72	74
U.S. History				
CMS (Black)	20	20	18	18
CMS (White)	59	51	55	57
NC (Black)	22	18	16	16
NC(White)	52	43	45	44
Forsyth (Black)	20	21	19	15
Forsyth (White)	53	49	53	51
Wake (Black)	31	24	25	23
Wake (White)	68	58	61	61

In fact, the data demonstrate the relationship between segregation and gaps in educational outcomes. Between 1978 and 1985, both Black and white students in Charlotte experienced steady gains in proficiency levels, with those increases leveling off with slight fluctuations between 1986 and 1997. However, the gaps between white and Black students remained fairly consistent during this time period, as displayed in Figure 8.

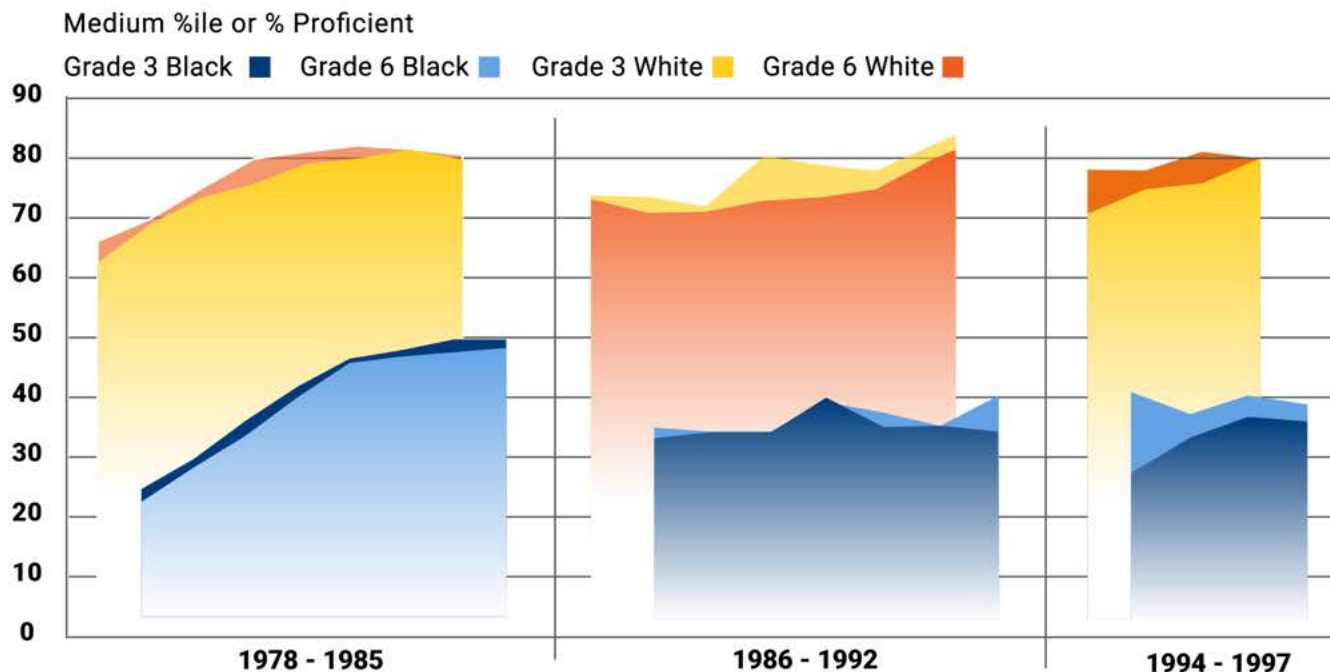
FIGURE 7: Percent of Proficient Students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by Race in Reading and Math (1992-1996)¹⁶

Reference: Smith, S. S., & Mickelson, R. A. (2000).

Racial Group	'92-'93	'93-'94	'94-'95	'95-'96
Reading				
CMS (Black)	37	38	40	39
CMS (White)	77	77	79	79
NC(Black)	44	46	47	48
NC (White)	73	74	76	77
Forsyth (Black)	47	47	50	49
Forsyth (White)	80	80	82	83
Wake (Black)	47	49	52	52
Wake (White)	83	85	88	88
Math				
CMS (Black)	37	39	42	43
CMS (White)	78	80	82	83
NC (Black)	39	42	45	48
NC(White)	71	74	77	80
Forsyth (Black)	40	43	47	47
Forsyth (White)	78	80	83	83
Wake (Black)	45	47	50	51
Wake (White)	85	86	89	89

FIGURE 8: Achievement Trends in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Grade 3 and 6 (1978-1997, except 1993)¹⁷

Reference: Armor, D. J., & Rossell, C. H. (2002).

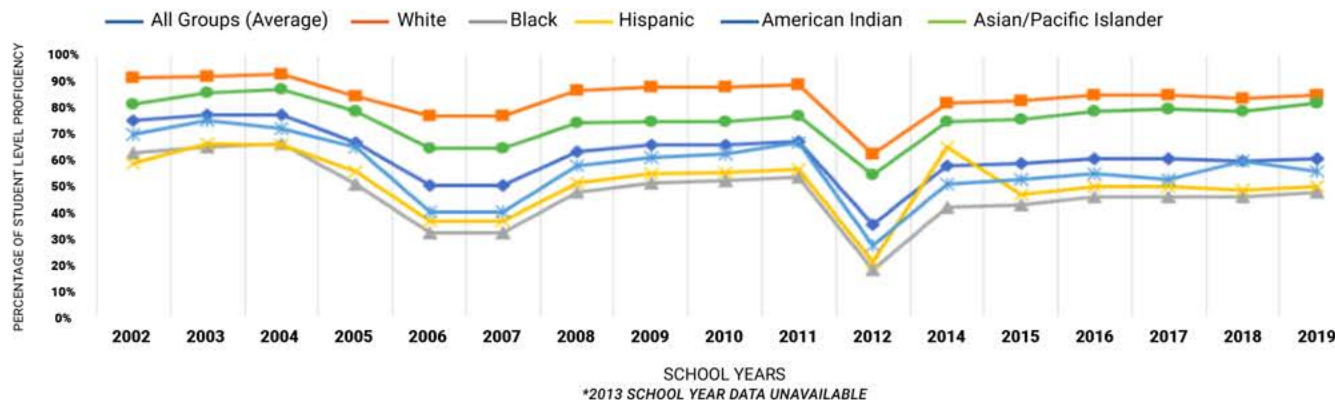


In more recent years, based on publicly available data (see Figure 8), the proficiency levels of all students have also remained relatively steady during the 2002-2019 period (with the exception of the transition to a new state level test from 2011-2012). Nonetheless, while CMS's aggregate performance has

trended slightly higher than the state average for the better part of the past decade (2006 - 2019), disparities between racial minorities and whites are still evident, in particular for Blacks and Hispanics, who exhibit the lowest achievement scores.

FIGURE 9: District Math/Reading Level Proficiency in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by Race (2002-2019)¹⁸

Reference: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2002-2019).



ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

And while graduation rates have steadily improved for all cohorts from 2010 until the most recent school year in 2019—with the exception of a slight decline between 2006 and 2008—non-white students, in particular Blacks and Hispanics, still lag behind white students and males behind females (as seen in Figure 10 below).

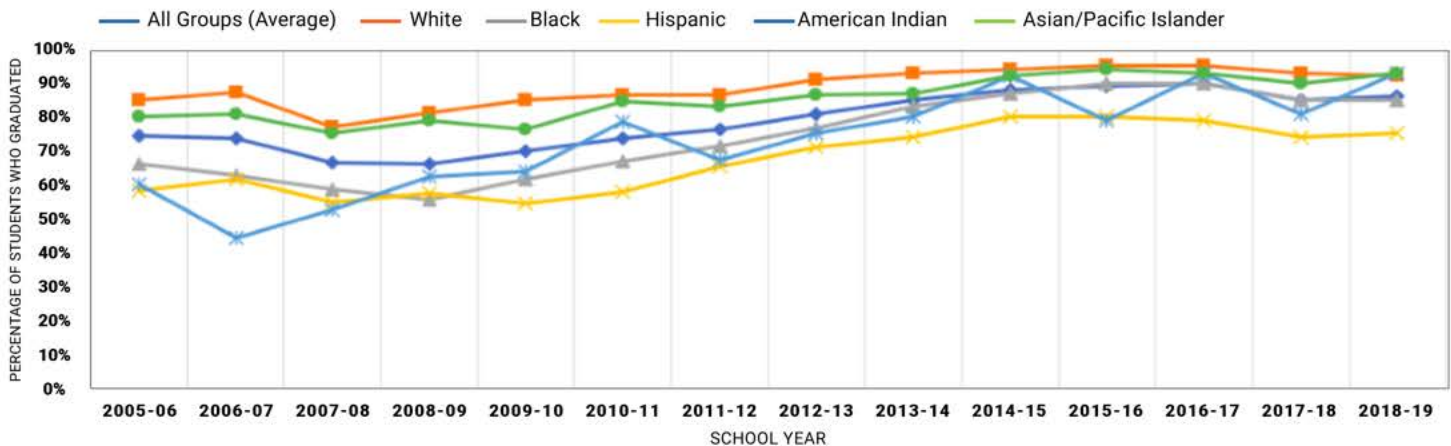
In sum, educational policy choices made in Charlotte have, over time, maintained high levels of segregation between white, Black, and Hispanic students. Place-based school segregation serves to embed the patterns of social dynamics early in life, and when those occur alongside residential segregation, it is

highly likely that social networks will reflect these segregated residential and educational patterns. In addition, educational policy that does not close achievement gaps between racial groups also serves to deepen segregated associational patterns.

At a high level, the housing and educational policy choices made by Charlotte's leaders reflect a lack of investment in policies that would diminish spatial segregation patterns and educational achievement gaps between racial groups. The racialized nature of Charlotte's social networks reflects the impact of these investment and policy choices.

FIGURE 10: District Graduation Rates in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by Race (2005-2019)¹⁹

Reference: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2002-2019).





HIGHLY RACIALIZED NETWORKS ADVANTAGE WHITES IN CHARLOTTE

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Our study asked respondents myriad questions about who is in their networks relative to job, educational, and housing opportunities. We asked how strong and reliable these connections were.

Because information and resources associated with social networks largely flow within racial groups rather than between racial groups in Charlotte, it is important to compare the strength of the information and resource flows across racial groups in Charlotte. That is, we want to understand whether resource and information flows are qualitatively different between racially homogenous social networks in Charlotte. To do that, we generated comparative plots of networks with reference to race, gender and income, across job, education, and housing networks.

We found that, in this context of highly racialized social relations, there were significant differences in the strength and breadth of social networks in Charlotte. Again, race was the driving differentiator, but gender was also important.

Whites of both genders in Charlotte are the most amply networked groups in Charlotte relative to jobs, education, and housing (Figures 11a & 11b).

We found that relative to other groups in our study, white men in Charlotte enjoy the broadest set of core robust connections. When they are seeking information, advice, financial or networking assistance, and references for jobs, education, and housing opportunities, they can rely on a large and broad set of reliable contacts. They have networks that include multiple professional contacts, family members, and personal associates.

We also found that, overall, white women in our study had the strongest financial support networks with networks relevant to jobs, education, and housing opportunities. More generally, across other types of support beyond financial support, white women were likely to have large and broad networks, and those networks were reliable for information, advice, mentoring, networking, and references for job, educational, and housing opportunities. Their networks consisted of professional, personal, and familial contacts. However, outside of financial support, relative to white men, their network support was strong, but not as reliable across all of the social relationships they reported. But importantly, those networks were stronger for white women than they were for Black men, Black women, or Latinos in our study.

We found that, in this context of highly racialized social relations, there were significant differences in the strength and breadth of social networks in Charlotte.





HIGHLY RACIALIZED NETWORKS SIGNIFICANTLY DISADVANTAGE BLACKS AND LATINOS

BROOKINGS

Black residents in Charlotte had fewer strong network contacts across job, education & housing opportunities than whites in Charlotte.

Our data show that, overall, Black residents in Charlotte had fewer strong network contacts across job, educational, and housing opportunities than whites in Charlotte. In addition, relative to white women and white men in our study, Black women and Black men had far less financial support overall within their networks. There was also a significant difference between Black men and Black women in the breadth and strength of network ties.

We found that Black women in Charlotte had large and broad job, educational, and housing opportunity networks, but these connections diminished in number and strength when we asked about reliable network contacts. Black women's networks in Charlotte included professional contacts, personal associates, and family members. Black women in our study could count on several people to provide support for information, advice, mentoring, and networking relative to jobs, education, and housing opportunities. Importantly, though, those core reliable connections were stronger and more numerous overall than that of Black men, but less reliable and numerous than those of white men or white women; this means that access to

information, networking, and references for job, educational, and housing opportunities was less robust for Black women relative to whites.

Black men in Charlotte also had large and broad networks with respect to job, educational, and housing opportunities. Their networks also included professional, personal, and familial contacts. However, the most significant finding about Black men in Charlotte was that their networks were not strong. That is, the group of people they could rely on to actually deliver on information, advice, financial or networking assistance and references was extremely narrow relative to their larger network and relative to that of white men and women and Black women in Charlotte. Black men in Charlotte typically relied on just one person on average for actual support when exploring employment, educational, or housing opportunities. Compared to white men and women, and Black women, Black men were the least supported by their networks. This means that the resources and information flows associated with social networks are extremely anemic for Black men in Charlotte. We discuss this in greater detail further in this report.

Compared to white men & women & Black women, Black men were the least supported by their networks.





LATINO SOCIAL NETWORKS ARE
THE SPARSEST OF ALL THE RACIAL
GROUPS WE STUDIED

BROOKINGS

We worked hard to ensure a representative pool of respondents, including of Latinos. What we found was the job, education, and housing networks of Latinos of either gender in Charlotte indicate that they are not well integrated into the larger Charlotte community. Their networks are small and relatively narrow, particularly reliant on family members. Of all the groups we analyzed, Latinas (Hispanic women) are the least networked in Charlotte.

This high-level picture for Latinos can be understood in terms of both the educational and housing policy choices we referenced above, as well as the absence of robust policy supports for new Americans arriving to Charlotte. Overall, this data would indicate that Charlotte policymakers have been slow to focus on how best to support Latinos in Charlotte across a variety of policy realms.

The job, education & housing networks of Latinos of either gender in Charlotte indicate that they are not well integrated into the larger Charlotte community.



FIGURES 11a & 11b: Network Characteristics Across Charlotte by Race and Gender

This shows the comparative breadth and strength of networks for white men, white women, Black men, Black women, Latino men and Latina women.





PARENTAL NETWORKS ARE IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS

BROOKINGS

One finding that is likely to bear directly on racial differences in economic mobility in Charlotte is that white men's and white women's fathers and mothers provided reliable financial support in job, educational, and housing networks. This was particularly strong in the housing networks of both white men and white women, a fact that may suggest a transfer of generational wealth within white families in Charlotte.

In stark contrast, only the mothers of Black men and Black women provided financial support, and often that support was neither as consistent nor as robust as that of white men and women in Charlotte. In our study, neither Black men nor Black women indicated that they received financial support from their fathers.

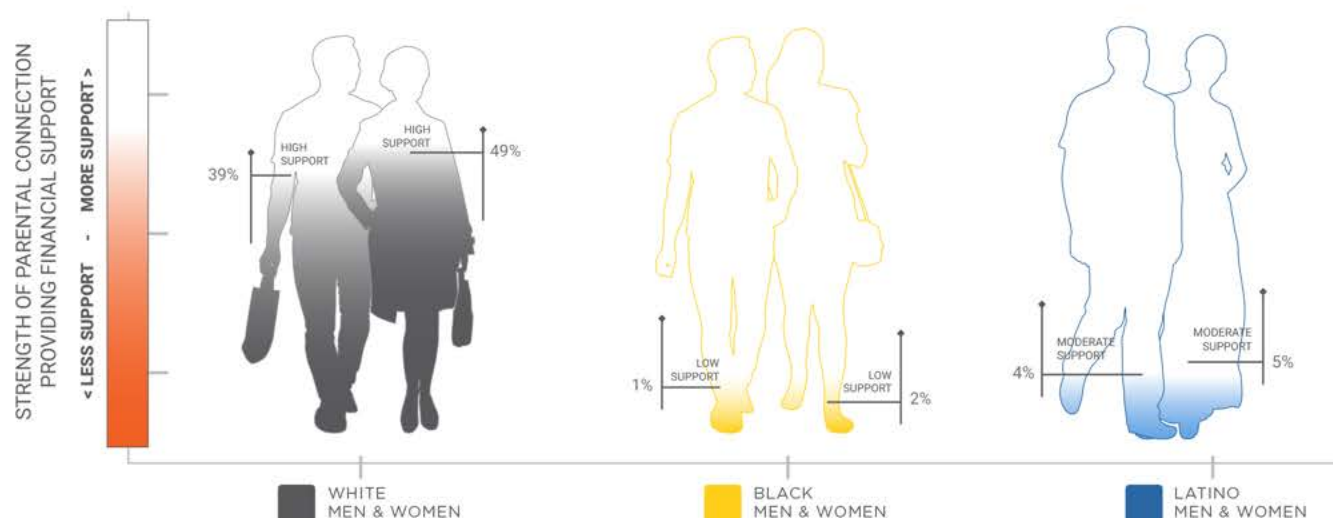
The patterns that we saw for Blacks in Charlotte were largely similar to those of Latino men and women in Charlotte. Our Latino participants indicated that their parents

are not providing financial support to their adult children in the job, education, and housing networks on which we collected data. Neither Latino men nor women indicated that they received financial support from either parent in any of these networks (Figure 12).

This finding of the differences in parental financial support across social networks by race is very consistent with the racial wealth gap findings of a 2020 report published by the Urban Institute at UNC Charlotte. That report found that 29% of Black families in Charlotte had zero or negative net worth²⁰ and 44% of Black households were asset poor.²¹ That report also found that 29% of Latino households had zero or negative net worth and 48% of Latino households were asset poor. This contrasts with a rate of 13% of zero or negative net worth and 18% asset poverty among whites in Charlotte. Put simply, part of the economic mobility picture within Charlotte is that Black and Latino parents in Charlotte do not have any wealth to transfer to their children, while white parents often do.

FIGURE 12: Importance of Parental Support Across Groups in Charlotte by Race and Gender

This shows the importance of parental financial support for white women and white men relative to Black women, Black men, Latino men and Latina women.

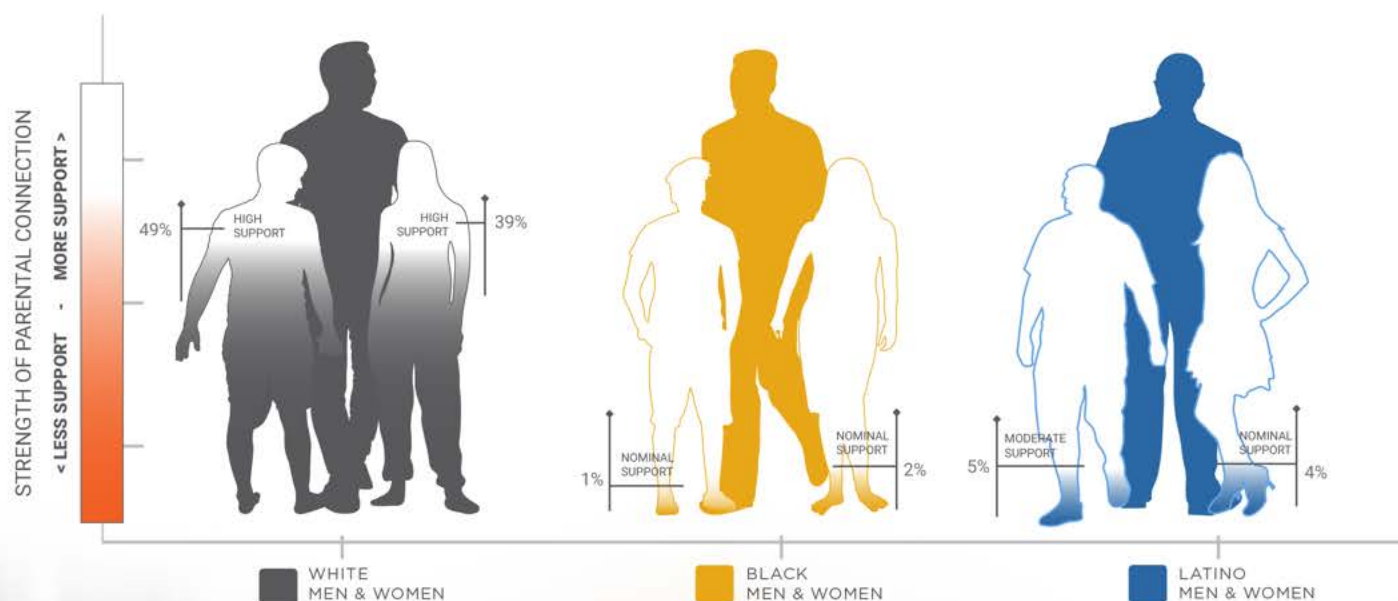


PARENTAL NETWORKS

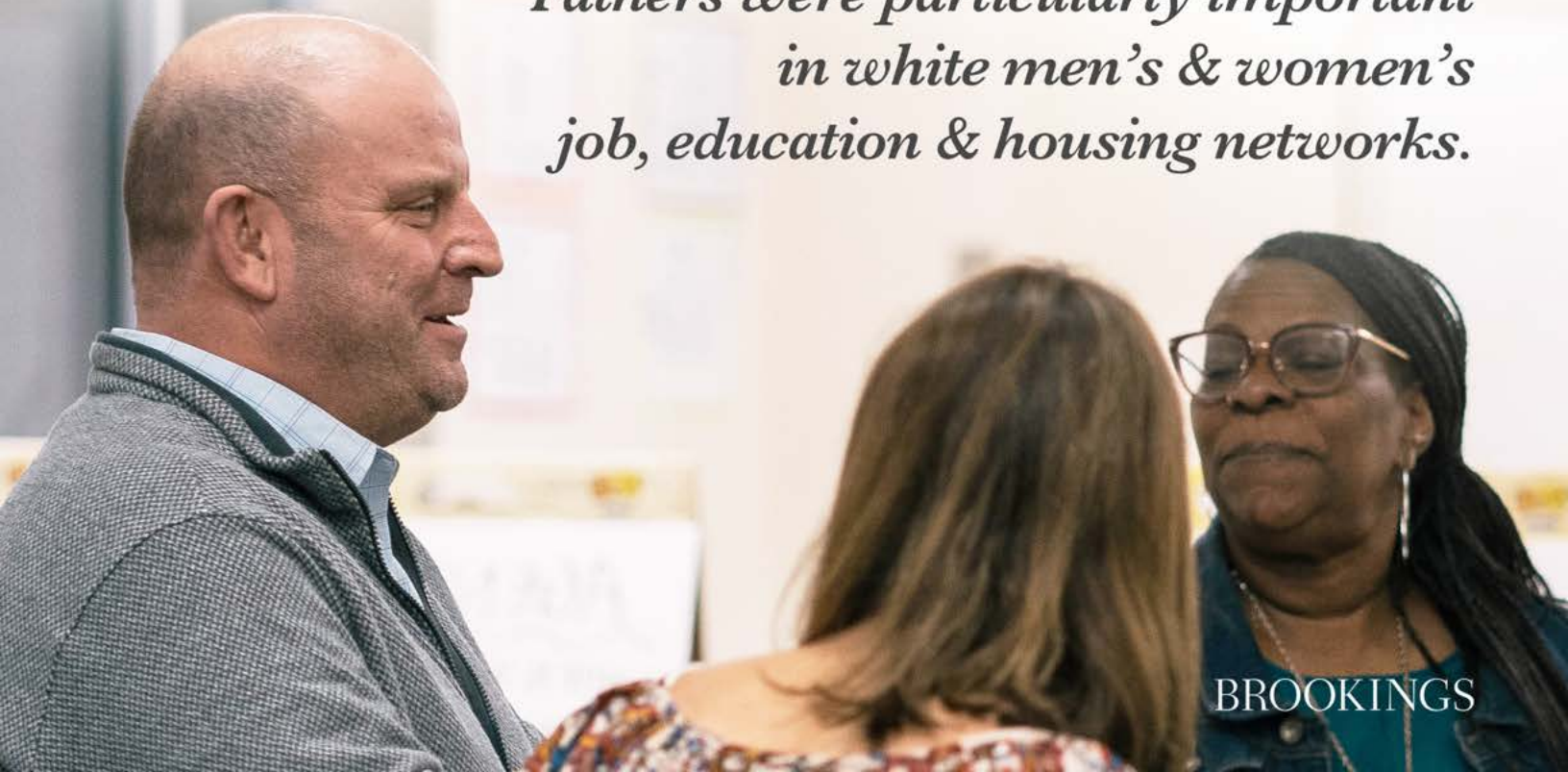
We also found that, beyond the financial realm, fathers were particularly important in white men's and white women's job, education, and housing networks. The same was not true for the networks of Black men or Black women: Neither Black men nor Black women enjoyed strong support from their fathers. While Black fathers offered

some informational, advice, and networking support to their daughters, they did not feature as strong connections for Black men. We also found that, among Latinos, fathers were infrequently involved in the social networks relative to jobs and were not mentioned with reference to education and housing (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13: Importance of Fathers in Charlotte Social Networks by Race and Gender



Fathers were particularly important in white men's & women's job, education & housing networks.





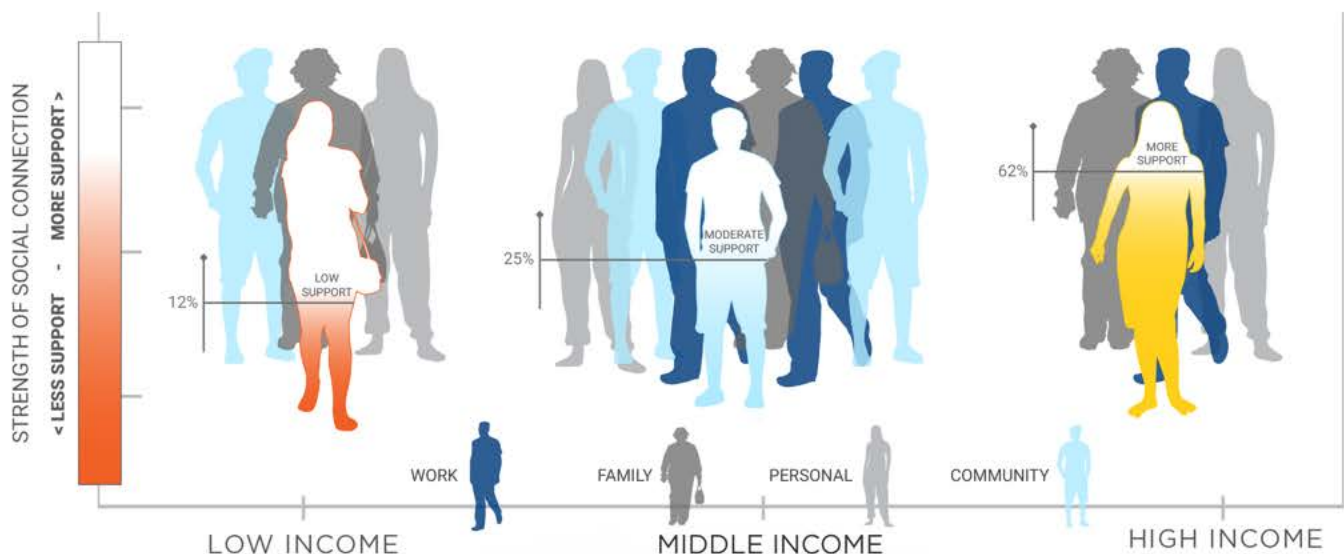
INCOME NETWORKS

BROOKINGS

Finally, we examined whether job, education, and housing networks varied by income. They do. Relative to both low-income and high-income participants in the study, middle-income residents of Charlotte had the broadest networks. Low-income participants had small networks. Interestingly, higher-income groups had fewer people in their networks, but those contacts were very reliable for information, advice, networking, and for providing references. In other words, at the top of the economic ladder, networks are small but strong (Figure 14).

This income gradient in social networks is consistent with data on the racial distribution of income in Charlotte. On average, the median income of white households in Charlotte is double that of Black and Latino households. Moreover, roughly one-third each of Black and Latino households earn less than \$30,000 annually.²² Therefore, middle-income and high-income social networks are largely composed of whites, and, as we have already seen, whites in Charlotte have broader and more robust networks relative to job, educational & housing opportunities than do Blacks and Latinos.

FIGURE 14: Networks by Income Group in Charlotte





AGGRESSIVE DISINVESTMENT IN BLACK BOYS

BROOKINGS

We also asked participants how their connections were formed. Social connections for jobs and education were most often formed at school (kindergarten-college) or at work. Those connection points highlight the importance of school climate in network formation. As we have seen, leaders in Charlotte have invested consistently in ensuring that white students have access to the resources and schools that place them in the best position to further their educations and to enjoy economic success. As a result, the networks within which white residents of Charlotte are enmeshed are broad, reliable, and robust.

We have already seen that Black men in Charlotte have distressingly thin networks relative to jobs, education, and housing. One way to understand their networks is to view those networks as partially reflective of the ways in which Black men in Charlotte are isolated from normal network formation moments.

We reviewed school discipline, incarceration, and Black male labor participation data. The picture that emerges is one in which policy choices have had the effect of removing Black males from the domains and moments that are critical to the formation of robust and reliable social networks.

*Social connections for jobs & education
were most often formed at school
(kindergarten-college) or at work.*





SCHOOL CLIMATE

BROOKINGS

We reviewed publicly available data on school climate in CMS from 2007-2018. What we saw was that there are significant and consistent disparities in school climate-related outcomes between white and non-white students. Black boys, in particular, account for the largest share of suspensions and criminal justice-involved incidents in CMS. In 2012, for example, Black boys accounted for 20,090 short-term suspensions while white boys accounted for 2,643 short-term suspensions (Figure 15).

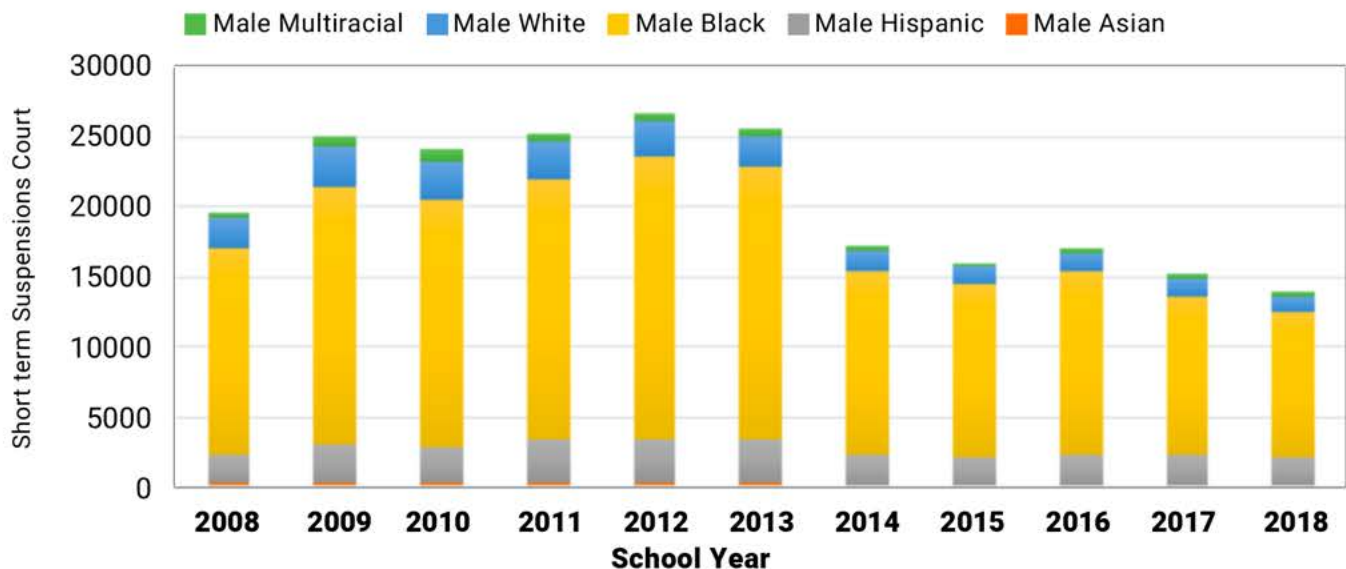
The vast majority of short-term school suspensions occur between 6th and 11th grades²³, years that are critical to identity formation & social/emotional development²⁴. So, in Charlotte, the effect of these racially disproportionate disciplinary actions is that Black boys are systematically removed from the school environment throughout their school careers—and particularly at a point where they would be forming more secure identities and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, when we consider this school suspension data and its impacts in the context of a school system that delivers poor academic achievement outcomes for Black boys, it is clear that there is an aggressive disinvestment in Black boys in Charlotte. School disciplinary and academic choices over decades indicate that CMS leaders, who are aware of the disparities in outcomes, consistently make choices that significantly disadvantage Black students—and Black boys, in particular. The effect of these decisions is to inhibit Black boys from forming robust social networks during adolescence.

To complete the picture of the formation of Black men's networks in Charlotte, it is important to also consider how the consistently low academic achievement of Black students in CMS also precludes access to college. Though it is beyond the scope of this report, the barriers that Black males face to higher education are yet another obstacle for them to overcome in forming network connections.

FIGURE 15: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Male Short-Term Suspensions by Race (2007-2018)²⁵

Reference: Public Schools of North Carolina (2008-2018)



**Short term suspensions are equivalent to 10 days or less*



INCARCERATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

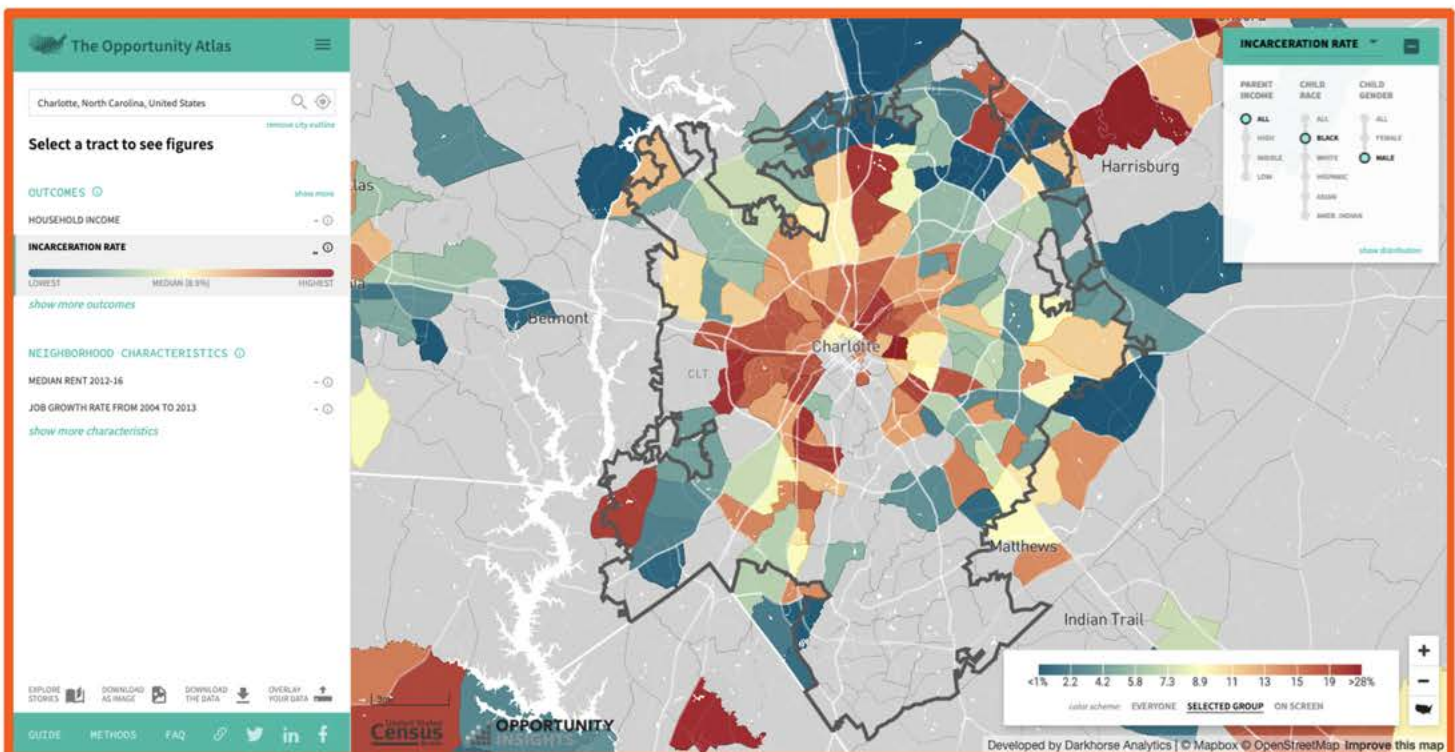
BROOKINGS

In Addition to the lost opportunities to form robust social networks that result from educational policy choices, Black men in Charlotte are consistently removed from social and professional life in disproportionate numbers. Black men in Charlotte are 9.6 times more likely to be incarcerated than are white men in Charlotte. Black unemployment rates are historically twice that of white unemployment rates in Charlotte and Black men are more likely to be unemployed than white men in North Carolina. So, in a context where most people form social networks at school and in the workplace, the high incarceration rates of

Black men (Figure 16), and the elevated rates of Black male unemployment relative to white males in Charlotte, also have the effect of removing Black men from both the school and employment settings so critical to social network formation. In sum, we would expect that the consistent and long-term policy choices made by Charlotte leaders that disinvest in and remove Black boys and Black men from formative educational, social, and professional contexts, would be reflected in weaker social networks. And our data are consistent with those expectations; the networks of Black men in Charlotte do not position them to reach their aspirations.

Figure 16: Incarceration Rates for Black Males in Charlotte (2020)²⁸

Reference: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Decennial Census.





AGENDA FOR CREATING A CHARLOTTE HORIZON

BROOKINGS

Policymakers and civic leaders have the opportunity to create a horizon community in Charlotte, where the possibility of economic mobility is equitably distributed and where the flow of resources and social capital allow all of Charlotte's residents to experience expanded horizons and well-being (Figure 17).

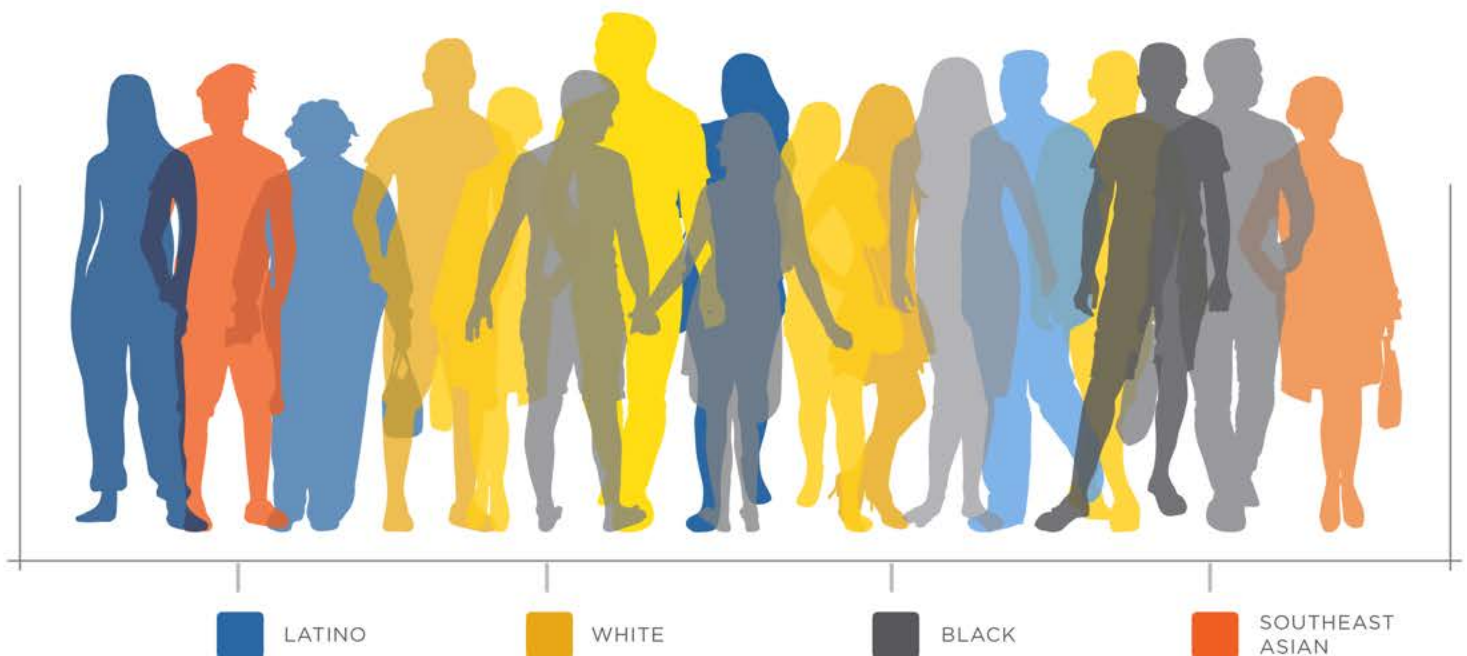
Social networks in Charlotte reflect the current state of policy choices, priorities, and accountabilities. For leaders in Charlotte to seize this opportunity to create a horizon community, three commitments have to be made. First, Charlotte's leaders must candidly engage with the racial dynamics of the city. This will require focusing on the disparate outcomes by race in the education, employment, criminal justice, and housing sectors and will require creating a racial equity plan to eliminate those disparities. Second, white leaders in Charlotte need to work collaboratively with Blacks and Latinos to identify who is accountable for racial equity in the city. One of the interesting

features of the Charlotte social, political, and commercial fabric is that there does not appear to be a party that is accountable for racial equity goals in the city. Charlotte, as a diverse community needs to assign accountability for these outcomes overall if they are to be addressed in a meaningful way. Third, white leaders in Charlotte need to work collaboratively across racial communities to identify and execute on the policy areas within which the greatest racial equity gains can be achieved in the next 3-5 years.

In our view, the situation of Black and Latino communities in Charlotte demands an urgent response. We recommend that the policy choices that are made include a specific measurable goal of driving down the school suspension and incarceration rates among Blacks until they are on par with those of whites. It should also include multiple initiatives to measurably close the racial wealth gap in Charlotte, and to decrease residential segregation and racial segregation in schools.

FIGURE 17: Charlotte Horizon Networks

Depiction of equitable social networks in Charlotte
(with equal access, connections and resources)



First, we recommend convening a citywide listening symposium where residents can explain to others who do not look like them what it means to walk in their shoes. Then, using the experiences shared there, a racial equity plan for Charlotte can be developed that articulates measurable, highly impactful equity goals that can be accomplished within the next 3-5 years.

For example, the city could decide to transition away from a juvenile justice system and school suspensions within the near future. It could also decide to develop a system that supports young Black and Latina mothers as they navigate pregnancy, parenting, and a career—the success of which could be measured by improvements

in the rates of maternal mortality among Black and Latina women and increases in the incomes of these women. Charlotte could also decide that it will place a significant sum in a college savings account for all kindergartners in CMS and then add to those accounts over time for children who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. The possibilities for an equity renaissance in the city are limitless.

But most importantly, these goals should be driven by those who are least advantaged in Charlotte, and by an acknowledgement that Charlotte's current social networks reflect choices made in the past—choices that residents in Charlotte can and should reshape to achieve a horizon community.



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