



**National Collaborative for Health Equity
Statement on SB 869
Commission on Reconciliation and Equity**

For More Information Please Contact
Brian Smedley, Ph.D.
Executive Director
National Collaborative for Health Equity
bsmedley@nationalcollaborative.org
202-765-2000

Maryland’s communities of color fare worse than majority-group communities across a host of measures of health, economic well-being, and opportunity. These problems are not the result of “cultural deficiencies” or low aspirations—children of color desire to be doctors, lawyers, and professional athletes to the same degree as white children. Rather, children of color in Maryland are much more likely than Maryland’s white children to face barriers to opportunity, which are often multiple and compounding over time.

Consider, for example, the fact that children of color in the Baltimore metropolitan area are much more likely than white children to live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty. High-poverty neighborhoods confer a host of risks to the children who live in them, including the fact that they are more likely than higher-income neighborhoods to be designated as “food deserts” (i.e., those that offer few options to buy affordable, nutritious food), have high levels of environmental degradation, face high rates of crime and violence, and must support school systems that lack the resources to prepare children for higher education and beyond.

Nearly 40% of African-American children in the Baltimore metropolitan area live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of people living in poverty (20% or more within a census tract), compared to only 2.5% of white children in the same area. Even when considering *only* poor children of all races, whites are still more advantaged: of poor white children in the Baltimore metro area, only 14.4% live in high-poverty neighborhoods, while the vast majority live in low-poverty neighborhoods. Among their similarly poor black peers, nearly two-thirds (65.9%) live in high-poverty neighborhoods.¹

These differences in neighborhood poverty exposure are neither accidental nor a matter of individual choice. Rather, housing segregation in Maryland, as well as in states around the country, is the result of a history of state-sanctioned policies, such as racially-restrictive covenants, that constrained housing for

people of color to less-desirable neighborhoods. And while such practices are illegal today, audit studies reveal that people of color continue to face barriers to true housing choice as a result of discriminatory lending and real estate practices.

Differences in neighborhood conditions have important consequences. For example, our prior research finds as much as a 30-year difference in life expectancy within Baltimore alone. Neighborhoods with the highest concentration of poor residents of color have the lowest life expectancy, relative to neighborhoods that have the highest concentration of wealthy residents.²

More importantly, our analysis revealed that this inequality has an historical link – those communities that were “redlined” in the 1930s and 1940s were among those with the lowest life expectancy today. We determined this by finding a map of Baltimore communities that were graded by the Federal Housing Authority as being “high risk” for issuance of federally-backed home mortgage loans, and therefore shaded with red so as to warn insurers that homes in these neighborhoods would not receive federal backing. This policy – long since outlawed – continues to affect the health, well-being, and economic opportunities of the overwhelmingly poor and black residents of these neighborhoods today, because it damaged their ancestors’ opportunities for home ownership and economic mobility.³

How can Maryland overcome this legacy of race-based inequality and discrimination? An approach that has been successfully adopted in South Africa and other countries is commonly called Truth and Reconciliation. This approach seeks to surface the ways in which racial and ethnic injustice persists, its historical roots, and strategies for action to overcome them.

Truth and reconciliation is not limited to our global neighbors. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has established an unprecedented Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) enterprise which will help communities embrace racial healing and uproot the unconscious and conscious beliefs in racial hierarchy. This is a multi-year effort designed to engage local, regional and national organizations in both the public and private sectors to explore historic patterns and structural racism, so that we may begin to identify both short- and long-term strategies for meaningful change across the country.⁴

Here in Maryland, there are similar efforts underway to help level the playing field for children of color relative to white children.

SB 869, introduced by Senator Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, would establish a Commission on Reconciliation and Equity to unearth the true causes of racial and ethnic inequality, and to find ways to heal all communities – including those that suffered from, as well as those that have benefitted from, racial oppression.

The purpose of the Commission is to foster reconciliation and achieve racial equity by increasing awareness about the nature, causes, and consequences of racial inequities. This work will involve public and private sector individuals and groups in a collective process to promote racial equity through recognition, understanding, and forgiveness. The Commission will also recommend strategies for change and actions in institutions, policies, and laws to eliminate systemic racism and promote equity, opportunity, healing, and harmony.

The Commission will hold hearings throughout the state and receive testimony from individuals, state and local government, community-based organizations, and other public and private organizations, and invite representatives from interested stakeholder groups to testify at the hearings.

Racial and ethnic inequities in health, employment, economic stability, access to safe and affordable housing, income inequality, educational opportunities, and achievement too often are the by-product of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices that our civil rights laws have yet to eliminate.

Moreover, these inequities hurt all residents of the state of Maryland. They are immoral and unacceptable. But they also damage our state's economic productivity; fuel social unrest and mistrust; contribute to high health care and criminal justice costs; and hamper the potential of our youth to contribute fully to society.

Given that children of color make up over half of the state's population, we owe it to them and our future to ensure that the playing field is level for all of us.

¹ DiversityData.org, "Share of Children Living in High Poverty Neighborhoods by Race/Ethnicity," available at www.diversitydata.org, accessed February 17, 2016.

² Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, *Place Matters for Health in Baltimore: Ensuring Opportunities for Health and Equity for All*, available at http://nationalcollaborative.org/sites/default/files/pictures/40925_JCBaltimoreReport.pdf, accessed February 17, 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation*, available at <https://www.wkkf.org/news-and-media/article/2016/01/wkkf-leads-broad-coalition-to-launch-trht>, accessed February 17, 2016.