

MEMORANDUM

November 30, 2022

To: Bryan Davis

Organization: Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC)

From: Jake Berman, Michael Blau

Project: Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission Active Transportation Plan Update

Re: Task 3.2: Equity Analysis – FINAL DRAFT

Introduction

Ensuring equity and embracing diversity are key principles in Chittenden County's planning processes. As the most populous county in the state of Vermont, it is home to a diverse cross-section of residents living in the rural, suburban, and urban communities across the county. However, the county's planning efforts need to acknowledge the historical disparities in transportation, the economy, housing, and health, all of which affect residents' ability to thrive, and address the present-day inequities between these diverse communities. This memo examines both historical and contemporary inequities within Chittenden County, compares local and national trends, and offers key takeaways about the disparities in income, transportation access and cost, environmental conditions, and more that are present throughout the county.

Historical Inequities

In 1956 the first Federal-Aid Highway Act was passed to create the interstate system. This law, in concert with the 1949 Housing Act, led to widescale construction of highways through urban Black communities to facilitate and support white flight throughout the 1950s-1970s. Displaced populations were relocated to massive public housing projects, notorious for their inhumane living conditions and poor construction. Such projects are less common in sparsely populated Vermont, but Burlington still features several public housing projects from the era of Urban Renewal, notably Decker Towers, which is now reserved for seniors and people with disabilities. Urban renewal projects also removed existing neighborhoods, including Burlington's Little Italy, which was razed in the 1960s. The history of transportation planning in Chittenden County plays a role in these disparities as well. As is the case with many communities, the county's urban core, centered in Burlington and Winooski, was separated from the suburban and rural population by the construction of I-89 in 1963, particularly the portion north of the I-189 spur. The I-189 spur itself extends into parts of South Burlington and Burlington, though originally there were plans to extend the spur along Lake Champlain that would have further isolated vulnerable populations in these communities. The current design of the Champlain Parkway project that is moving forward evolved to minimize impacts to vulnerable and underserved population in the area.¹

Public housing and highway construction were the twin cornerstones of the racially motivated urban renewal that swept the country from the 1940s to 1970s, resulting in a devastating loss of urban housing stock and the creation of hyper-segregated communities. Population loss was less severe in Burlington and surrounding Chittenden

County, due in part to a large influx of counter-culture and politically radical newcomers from other states (aka hippies) in the 1970s.²

The civil rights movement led to widespread calls for school integration, housing reform, and access to jobs for urban Black communities nationwide. The passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1966 was intended to prevent discrimination in housing in response to the systemic inequities caused by redlining and other racist housing practices. The nationwide uprising of 1968, following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., led to a renewed exodus of whites from cities and a decline in urban economies. While 71 percent of Chittenden County's residents lived in the dense urban core in 1940, half of the county's residents had settled on greenfield sprawl by 1996.³ Nationwide, this migration climaxed in the 1970s, when more than two-thirds of large cities lost population⁴ and corporations, accelerating their financial crises.

Meanwhile, Black and other people of color remained in cities and increasingly became a large proportion, or in some cases a majority, of urban populations. However, with some notable exceptions such as Cleveland and Atlanta, white power structures retained control of cities. They conspired with the transportation industry to prioritize the movement of white, suburban motorists into their cities, rather than investing in Black communities. Cities converted streets to one-way, widened roads, and adjusted signal timing to decrease delays and in theory increase the safety of the white suburban car commuter over local Black residents walking, biking or using streets for everyday uses.⁵

In addition to the numerous policies designed to motivate people to leave urban areas, economic restructuring was also a factor that contributed to the fragmentation of the urban core, which in turn, motivated residents to move out of deteriorating urban areas and into newly built suburbs. Deindustrialization led to the decentralization of cities. The suburbs were viewed as a way for whites to escape urban blight, while people of color, low-income residents and the dependent elderly were unable to afford to move or/and experienced rampant racism in the suburban real estate process. On top of all of this, investments in mass motorization intensified the ease of white flight. At the same time, initiatives to expand transit were stymied by suburban racism.^{6 7}

Contemporary Inequities

Inequities from the past have contributed to present-day outcomes for disadvantaged groups in Chittenden County. County-wide, vulnerable populations experience disparate outcomes in environmental exposure, income, transportation and housing costs, police interactions, and more. Across a range of demographic groups, past inequities influence people's spatial distribution throughout the county. Conversely, where people live in turn impacts their access to services and essential needs.

Chittenden County

Past policy decisions like the location of highways have directly impacted the quality of life for certain disadvantaged groups. For example, the communities along I-89, particularly in Burlington, Winooski, South Burlington, and Colchester, are home to the highest concentrations of people of color, households below the poverty line, households without vehicle access, and residents with limited English proficiency in the county. Particulate matter exposure and asthma rates are also much higher in areas near the highway compared to the rest of the county, putting these vulnerable populations at greater risk.⁸

Not all vulnerable populations are concentrated in the densest parts of the county. Adults with limited educational attainment are distributed throughout the county, with slightly higher concentrations in Winooski, Burlington, Essex, Colchester, and Milton. The population under 18 years of age and above 64 years of age are also distributed across much of the county, with lower concentrations of both groups in the densest parts of the county.

Across the county, transportation access is difficult for many. A family making the median income in Chittenden County is estimated to spend nearly half (49 percent) of their income on housing and transportation costs combined, above the 45 percent threshold to be considered cost burdened.⁹ Sixteen percent of Chittenden County households are considered severely cost burdened.¹⁰ About eight percent of households have no access to vehicles despite much of the county's development being geared towards automobile infrastructure.¹¹

Disparities between racial and ethnic groups also exist in Chittenden County. While the median household income of \$76,806 is the highest in the state and 22 percent higher than the statewide median of \$63,001, Black households' median income was less than half the county average at \$36,824.¹² Chittenden County residents also experience different treatment in interactions with police, particularly during traffic stops. Compared to white drivers, Black drivers are about 3.5 times more likely to be searched and Hispanic drivers are about 3.9 times more likely to be searched during traffic stops. Black drivers are arrested about 70 percent more often than white drivers, while Hispanic drivers are about 90 percent more likely to be arrested during traffic stops.¹³

These numbers are not uncommon, but they should be cause for alarm among decisionmakers. Some municipalities and advocacy groups are taking steps to reduce inequities, but the county overall lacks a strong coordinated effort in addressing racial and ethnic disparities.

Figures 1-8 show key demographic indicators for the entire county, with an interpretation of the maps below.

Figure 1: Poverty Levels

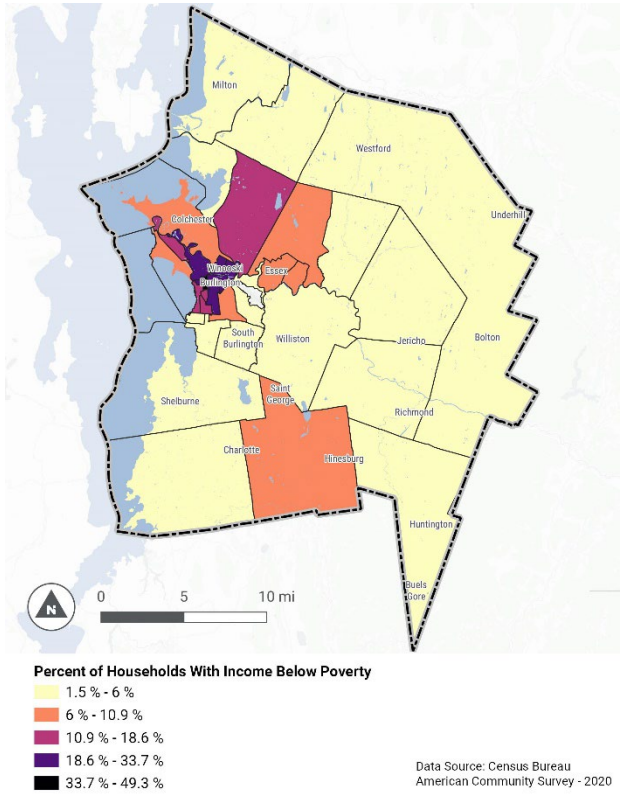


Figure 2: Race

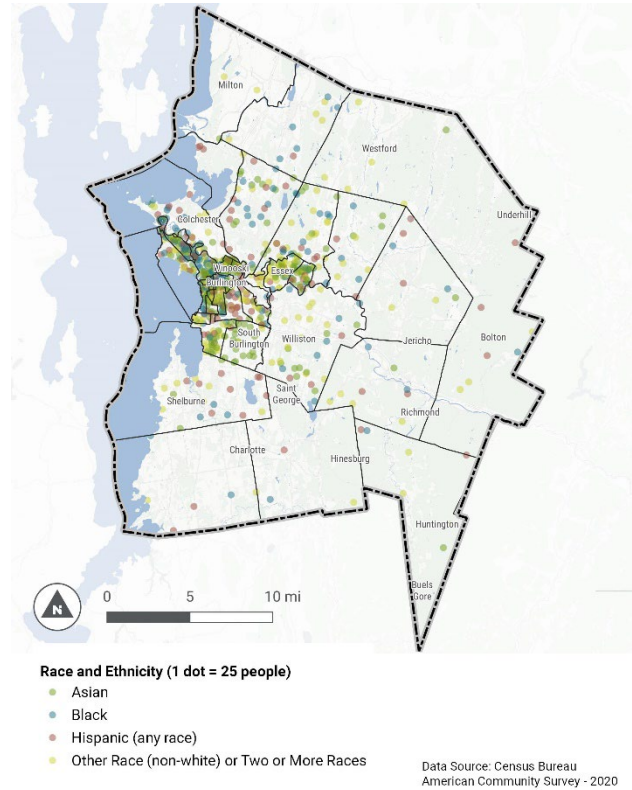


Figure 2: Youth

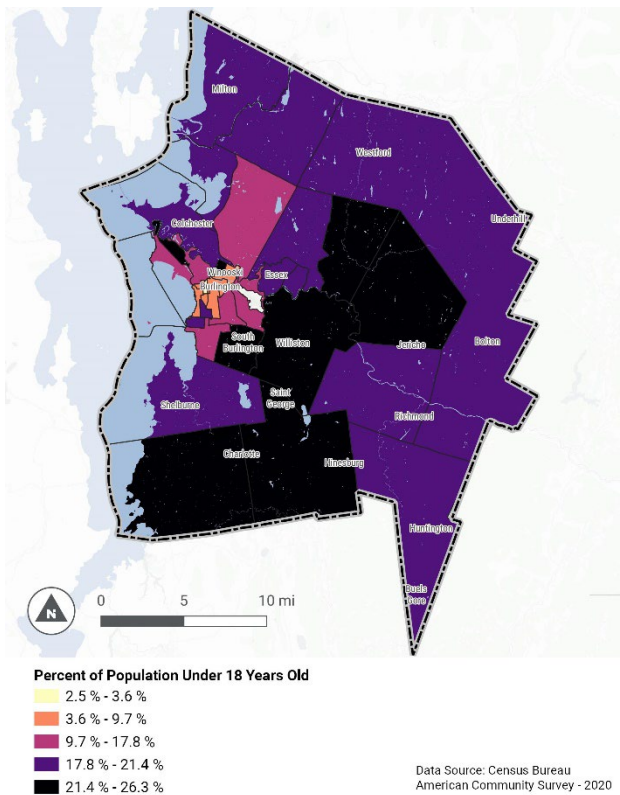


Figure 4: Seniors

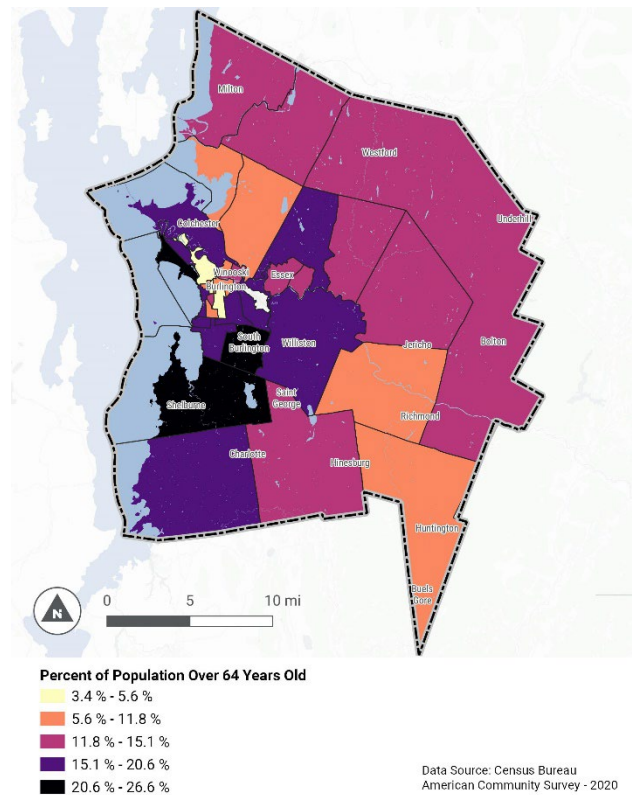


Figure 5: Zero Vehicle Households

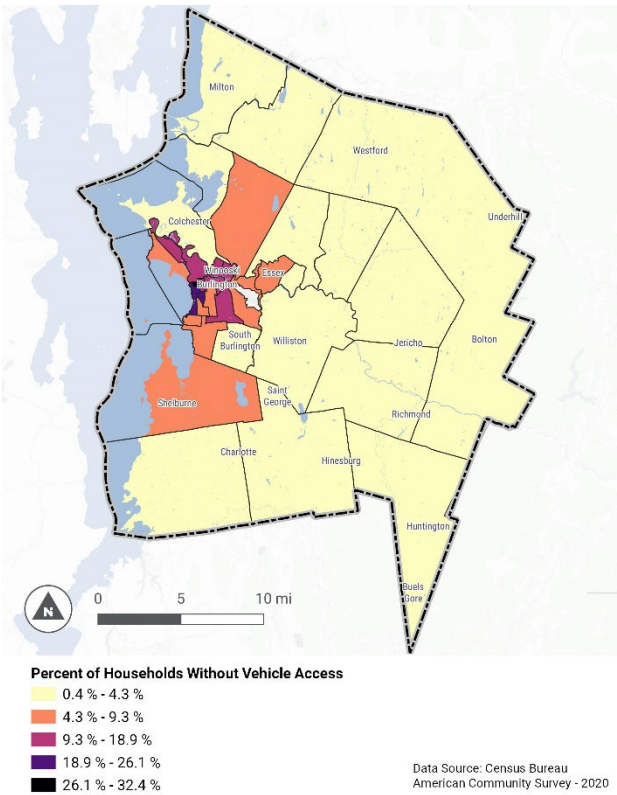


Figure 6: Immigrants

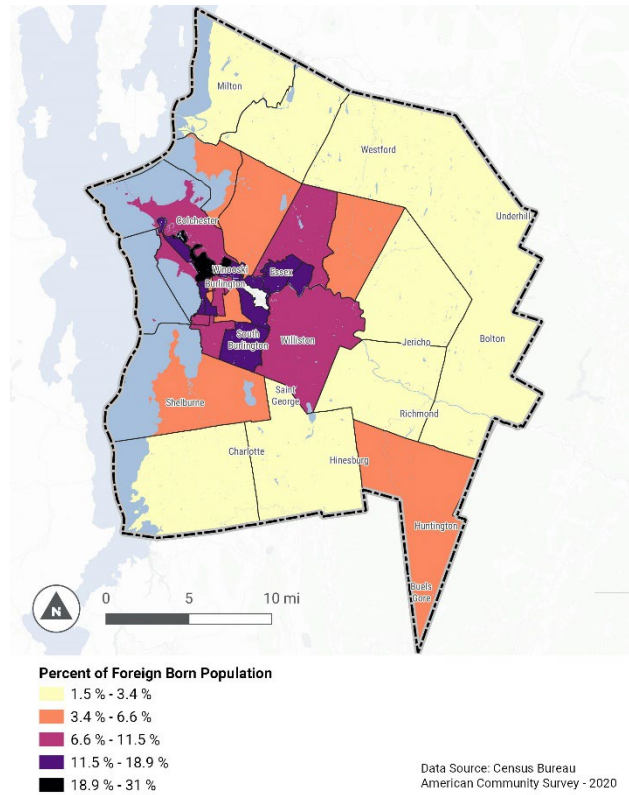


Figure 7: Limited English Proficiency

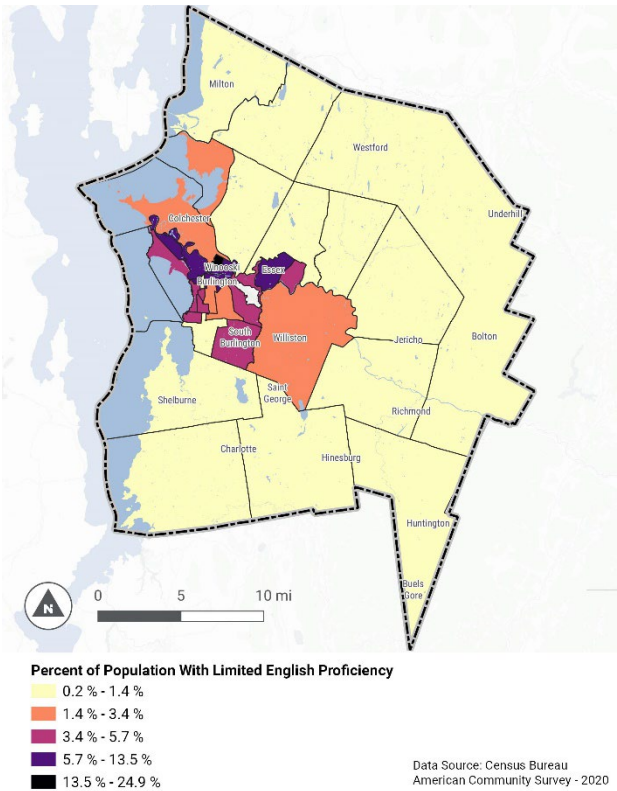
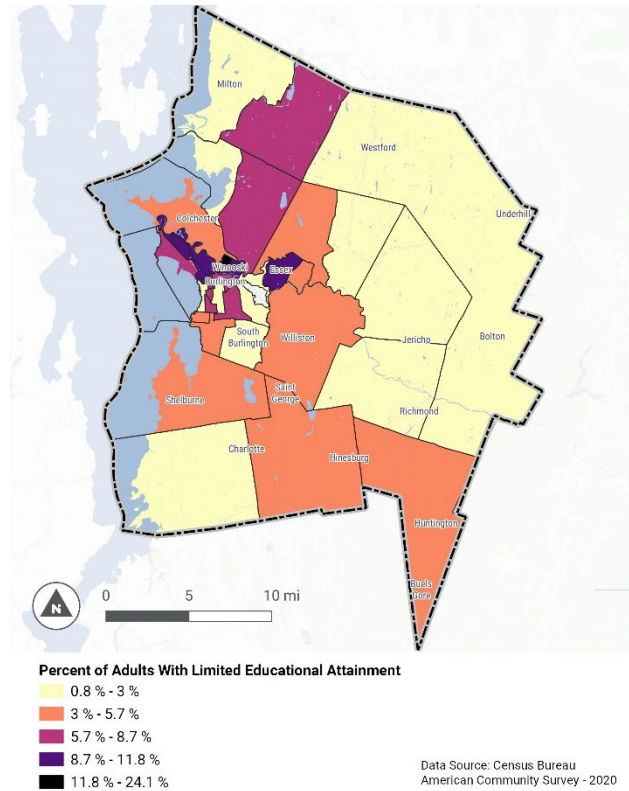


Figure 8: Limited Education Attainment



Poverty Levels

High-poverty areas (Figure 1) are concentrated in Burlington and its suburbs (Winooski, Colchester, Essex, and South Burlington). Low-income households are more likely to use transit and active transportation than the general population. In Chittenden County, these communities are in higher density urban areas with street grids, sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and higher levels of transit service, so there is strong potential for reinforcing bicycle and pedestrian connections and further expanding the active transportation network in low-income areas. An exception to this trend is the census tract in which Hinesburg is located. This tract experiences higher poverty rates than other rural parts of the county, but lacks bicycle facilities.

Race

Figure 2 shows the population density of people who identify as minority racial and/or ethnic groups. Racial and ethnic minority groups are most concentrated in the urban core, where poverty rates are also relatively higher, although racial minority groups are also present in Williston, Shelburne, Huntington, and several other small towns and rural locations. Chittenden County's population grew 7.5 percent from 2010 to 2020, with 83 percent of new residents identifying as Hispanic, Black or African American, and/or American Indian and Alaska Native, according to the US Census. Black, Indigenous and people of color make up 11 percent of the county's population.

In the past decade, people of color have led the growth in bicycling nationwide, with a 90 percent increase in biking trips among Black people, 60 percent among Asians, and 30 percent among Latinx people, compared to only 20 percent for white people.¹⁴ Given this trend, communities in Chittenden County with a strong presence of people of color should be prioritized for improved bicycle accommodations.

Age

Youth

There are more youth under 18 years of age in the outlying parts of the county than there are in Burlington and its environs (Figure 3). This is an unexpected finding, given the concentration of colleges and K-12 schools in the Burlington area. Youth comprise between 21 and 26 percent of the populations in the census tracts containing Williston, Jericho, St. George, Charlotte, and Hinesburg, and they make up 17 to 21 percent of the population in remaining parts of the county outside the urbanized Burlington area. Policies and programs that support safe walking and bicycling for youth, such as Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero, should be encouraged in these communities.

Seniors

For seniors, this trend is flipped, with the highest proportions of adults over 64 years old living in South Burlington and Shelburne, as well as the north part of Burlington between the Winooski River and Lake Champlain (Figure 4). The share of older adults in Chittenden County has been on the rise, growing from about thirteen percent of the population in 2013 to sixteen percent in 2019.¹⁵

Zero Vehicle Households

Households with no vehicles available are most heavily concentrated in Burlington, Winooski, and South Burlington, with some areas of Colchester, Essex, and Shelburne also having sizeable concentrations (Figure 5). Active transportation access is especially important in communities where low vehicle access is prevalent.

Immigrants

Foreign-born residents are distributed across the county in a similar pattern as residents of color (Figure 6), with high concentrations in the denser urban and suburban areas around Burlington as well as smaller rural towns like

Huntington and Buels Gore. Bicycling and walking for transportation are more common in much of the world, including many parts of Latin America, Asia, and Europe than in the United States, which may contribute to higher rates of bicycling among immigrant groups.¹⁶ These communities may be amenable to improved bicycle and pedestrian accommodations.

Limited English Proficiency

Communities with a high share of residents over five years old with limited English proficiency are mostly in the urban core as well as suburbs like Williston, Colchester, and Essex (Figure 7). Outreach efforts in these communities should be especially mindful that people may not speak English and translation services should be provided. More analysis on which languages are commonly spoken in various communities should be conducted.

Limited Educational Attainment

Adults with limited education attainment – those who have not completed high school – live throughout the county, including urban, suburban, and rural communities (Figure 8).

Burlington

As the largest and most diverse community in Chittenden County, Burlington merits some additional examination regarding its sociodemographic composition. According to the 2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, about seventeen percent of Burlington's residents are non-white or non-Hispanic of any race, compared to about eleven percent for the county as a whole. About 16 percent of Burlington's households lack access to a vehicle, and roughly eight percent of the city's adults have limited educational attainment and five percent have limited English proficiency.¹⁷

The City's 2019 Equity Report provides additional insight on Burlington's diversity. In 2019:

- Fourteen percent of people in Burlington spoke a language other than English at home.
- Thirteen percent of Burlington residents were people living with a disability.
- Veterans comprised three percent of the total population.
- 24.7 percent of people in Burlington lived below the poverty line, nearly double the state poverty rate of 11.4 percent and significantly higher than the national poverty rate of 14.1 percent.
- An estimated 32.5 percent of Black residents lived in poverty.
- The median household income for Black households was \$30,357, nearly \$22,000 less than that of white households at \$52,092.
- Ninety-six percent of homes were owned by white families.

In addition to the economic factors listed above, disparities within the transportation system affect the ability of disadvantaged populations to access safe and convenient opportunities for active transportation. Nationally, residents of low-income neighborhoods of color generally have less access to high-quality pedestrian infrastructure and fewer opportunities to enjoy walkable environments than white and high-income areas. These disparities expose socially vulnerable groups to more traffic fatality and injury risk,^{18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25} police harassment and violence,^{26 27 28 29 30 31 32} greater risk of chronic disease,^{33 34 35 36} and fewer economic opportunities.³⁷

In particular, police harassment and racial profiling of people walking and bicycling is a systemic problem in communities across the country. Aggressive police tactics that lead to arrest or even death are a major fear for people of color who use active modes of transportation. There are no data available for Chittenden County related specifically to pedestrian and bicycle traffic stops or violations. However, Black motorists are also at risk of state sanctioned discrimination and violence from police. In 2019, Burlington police pulled over 2,063 vehicles, 9.6

percent of which were operated by Black drivers. This is nearly double the proportion of Black residents of Burlington (5.3 percent).

Conclusion

Chittenden County's history diverged from many parts of the country in that it did not see massive demographic shifts in the second half of the 20th Century due to federal policies and structural racism. The county did, however, experience the impacts of urban renewal, housing and highway projects, and many disparities persist in the county today, especially for low-income residents of color. There are strong opportunities for improving active transportation accommodations in those communities, and the literature indicate those improvements would be welcome. These findings lead to several implications for the Active Transportation Plan update process.

Decisionmakers must listen to residents' priorities for better housing, education, and other systemic improvements that may be more urgent and impactful than an active transportation project. Entering these dialogues with an eagerness to address the community's self-identified needs is important to repairing broken relationships. Proactive relationship building between decisionmakers and community members is key to developing equitable and successful projects. When local agencies are able to marshal resources that help solve residents' problems (such as bringing code enforcement officers to public meetings to address concerns about absentee landlords), community members may eventually grow to value these relationships. This establishes trust and a willingness to collaborate on future projects.

In some cases, through listening sessions, workshops, walking tours, and other forms of genuine engagement, residents may conclude that active transportation investments would benefit their communities. A holistic approach often works best: framing bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure as a tool for economic development, improving public health, traffic safety, and other community priorities will be well-received by at least some community members.

The community may also want different types of projects, or prefer them in different places, compared to what local agencies propose. For example, they might have different preferences for what makes a "safe" route in their community due to crime concerns rather than traffic speeds. Local knowledge and expertise should guide these decisions.

Findings from this analysis also led to several additional equity focused tasks as part of the ATP:

- The Bicycle Network Analysis examines network improvements in high need neighborhoods based on race, income, and vehicle access.
- The project prioritization process includes an equity factor that gives a higher score to bicycle network projects serving different types of equity needs (such as minority, low-income, and low-vehicle access census tracts) and larger numbers of high needs areas. The equity factor is weighted higher than any other factor to reflect its importance to CCRPC and the communities it serves.

Endnotes

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