

# **Prince George's County Council Briefing**



## **Power, Privilege, and Peril: Governing in Prince George's County—a Regional Perspective**

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## Research Project Overview

Blacks' incorporation into United States (U.S.) society with life chances commensurate with Whites is a centuries-old social challenge. Black-White inequality research from the 1970s forward focused on skills gaps—Blacks' inability to access educational and employment opportunities—and spatial mismatches—Blacks' concentration in cities isolating them from opportunity-rich suburbs. The contemporary suburban Black middle class, in theory, overcomes these challenges.

During 2017 and 2018, I examined the extent to which this is the case through a two-year ethnography of the U.S. local jurisdiction with the largest concentration of middle class African Americans—Prince George's County (PGC), Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Based on direct observation of policy and budget development processes and 58 interviews with county leaders and residents, I find that while nearly all U.S. locales endure certain constraints, largely stemming from federal and state funding retrenchment and pro-economic-growth imperatives, PGC contends with additional barriers due to its racial composition and its economic position among D.C. area jurisdictions.

PGC, as the most affordable county in the region, is the “sink” for negative regional economic development effects, such as those related to gentrification. Most consequential for PGC's fiscal health, it absorbs a disproportionate share of low-income households who place significant demand on county services, including its public schools. Racial residential segregation, which reflects Whites' stigmatization of Black people and the spaces they occupy, drives the relative balance of economic development costs and benefits PGC experiences. PGC officials manage budget “structural precarity and peril” by making hard tradeoffs between vital public services that Whiter, wealthier D.C. jurisdictions do not. PGC leaders also have more constrained development options. I show how racialized regional market and government processes shape local government capacity to support a high quality of life and conclude the suburban Black middle class receives fewer returns to its class status, relative to Whites, because of such processes.

## Figures Related to Key Findings

**Figure 1.**

<b>Demographic Comparison between the United States, Maryland, and Prince George's County in 2018</b>			
	<u>Prince George's County</u>	<u>Maryland</u>	<u>United States</u>
<b>Total Population</b>	909,308	6,042,718	327,167,434
<b>Race and Ethnicity (%)</b>			
Black	64.6	30.8	13.4
White	26.8	59.0	76.6
Latino (Black or White Race)	18.5	10.1	18.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.8	6.8	6.0
American Indian	1.1	0.6	1.3
Two or More Races	2.7	2.8	2.7
<b>Income and Wealth (\$)</b>			
Median Household Income	78,607	78,916	57,652
Median Home Value (Owner Occupied)	272,900	296,500	193,500
Median Rent	1,385	1,311	982
<b>Percent Below Poverty Line</b>	8.6	9.3	12.3
<b>Educational Attainment (%)</b>			
College Degree or Higher	31.9	39.0	30.9
High School Diploma or GED	86.1	89.8	87.3

**Source: United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts," as follows:**  
 Prince George's: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/princegeorgescountymaryland/IPE120217#IPE120217>  
 Maryland: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/md>  
 United States: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/INC110217>

**Figure 2.**

<b>Demographic Comparison between Prince George's, Montgomery, and Fairfax Counties in 2018</b>			
	<u>Prince George's</u>	<u>Montgomery</u>	<u>Fairfax</u>
<b>Total Population</b>	909,308	1,052,567	1,150,795
<b>Race and Ethnicity (%)</b>			
Black	64.6	19.7	10.4
White	26.8	60.4	65.2
Latino (Black or White Race)	18.5	19.6	16.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.8	15.7	20.1
American Indian	1.1	0.7	0.6
Two or More Races	2.7	3.4	3.8
<b>Income and Wealth (\$)</b>			
Median Household Income	78,607	103,178	117,515
Median Home Value (Owner Occupied)	272,900	467,500	534,800
Median Rent	1,385	1,693	1,823
<b>Percent Below Poverty Line</b>	8.6	7.0	6.7
<b>Educational Attainment (%)</b>			
College Degree or Higher	31.9	58.3	60.7
High School Diploma or GED	86.1	91.1	92.0

**Sources: United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts," accessed April 29, 2019:**  
 Prince George's: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/princegeorgescountymaryland/IPE120217#IPE120217>  
 Montgomery: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montgomerycountymaryland>  
 Fairfax: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fairfaxcountyvirginia/PST045217>

Figure 3.

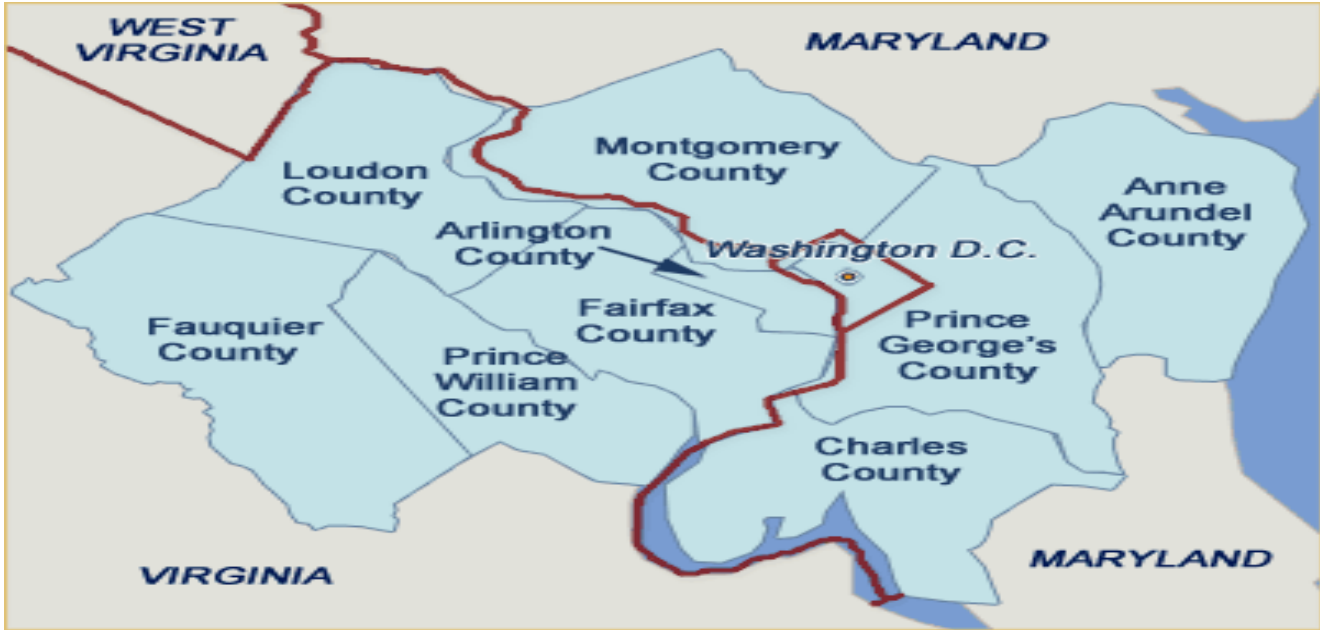


Figure 4.

<b>2018 Operating Budget, Per Capita Spending, Median Home Value, and Poverty Rate Cross-County Comparison</b>			
	<u>Prince George's</u>	<u>Montgomery</u>	<u>Fairfax</u>
<b>Operating Budget, All Sources (in Billions)</b>	\$3.9	\$5.4	\$8.0
<b>Per Capita Spending</b>	\$4,273	\$5,100	\$6,966
<b>Median Home Value</b>	\$272,000	\$468,000	\$535,000
<b>Percent Population Below Poverty</b>	8.6	7.0	6.7

Sources: County Revenue Offices, as follows:  
 Fairfax: [https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/budget/sites/budget/files/assets/documents/fy2018/adopted/overview/07\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/budget/sites/budget/files/assets/documents/fy2018/adopted/overview/07_executive_summary.pdf)  
 Prince George's: <https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/17965/Budget-OverviewPDF>  
 Montgomery: [https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press\\_Detail.aspx?Item\\_ID=21126](https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?Item_ID=21126)

Figure 5.

<b>County Comparison of All Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics in 2018</b>			
	<u>Prince George's</u>	<u>Montgomery</u>	<u>Fairfax</u>
<b>Reading</b>	24	54	81
<b>Mathematics</b>	26	48	81

Sources: state education agencies for Maryland and Virginia, as follows:  
Prince George's and Montgomery Counties: <http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/Graphs/#/Assessments>  
Fairfax County: <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/fairfax-county-public-schools>

Figure 6.

<b>PGC and MoCo Student Achievement Comparison, 2018 School Year</b>		
Percentage Students Meeting or Exceeding Maryland Standard		
	<u>PGC</u>	<u>MoCo</u>
<b>English</b>		
Grade 4	29.8	53.6
Grade 8	31.1	52.6
<b>Math</b>		
Grade 4	17.5	50.7
Algebra 1	11.4	40.6

Source: Maryland State Department of Education, "Data Downloads: ELA Math"  
<http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/Graphs/#/DataDownloads/datadownload/3/17/6/15/XXXX>

**Figure 7.**

<b>Fiscal Year 2018 Public School Spending in Prince George's, Montgomery, and Fairfax Counties</b>			
	<u>Prince George's</u>	<u>Montgomery</u>	<u>Fairfax</u>
<b>Total Student Enrollment</b>	132,667	161,302	189,000
<b>Total Spending*</b>	\$1.9 billion	\$2.5 billion	\$2.8 billion
County Contribution	\$739 million	\$1.67 billion	\$1.97 billion
State Contribution	\$1.1 billion	\$680 million	\$636 million
<b>Per Pupil Allocation</b>	\$14,300	\$15,498	\$14,815
<b>Percent Low-income Students**</b>	61	33	31

\* Does not add; remainder is federal and other contributions  
 \*\* Those qualifying for reduced-price meals  
**Sources: County boards of education, as follows:**  
 Prince George's: <https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/18010/Board-of-EducationPDF>  
 Montgomery: [https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/budget/fy2018/FY2018\\_OperatingBudgetSummary\\_FINALforWeb.pdf](https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/budget/fy2018/FY2018_OperatingBudgetSummary_FINALforWeb.pdf)  
 Fairfax: <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/FY18Approved%20Budget.pdf>

## **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

### **From Respecting the Game to Changing the Game**

Below I highlight my study’s major findings as instances of PGC officials “playing by the rules”—that is, adapting to extant government and market opportunities and constraints—without seeking significant change to the *terms by which* the game is played—what I call “respecting the game.” Then I offer policy and other social change recommendations that would potentially significantly improve Blacks’ quality of life—policies to “change the game.” I appreciate local leaders’ primary responsibility, including those in PGC, is to the people who elected them. At the same time, I offer “conversation starters” for “zooming out” to explore the range of what comprehensive social change might include, potentially lifting constraints local leaders manage.

### ***Case of Disrespect #1: Market Institutions and Actors Prey upon PGC’s Black Residents***

*How PGC Could Change the Game:* In instances like the Great Recession foreclosure crisis, PGC leaders could have resisted being held to the same rules as White-majority or plurality jurisdictions. This might have included county and state officials opening a formal inquiry into the issue to draw media attention and from there determining the extent to which bond holders were culpable and/or benefited from “bad actor” activity related to the conditions creating the foreclosure crisis.

## ***Case of Disrespect #2: Federal and State Governments Chronically Underfund Public Goods and Services Blacks Receive***

*How PGC Could Change the Game:* the county could issue a report pinpointing historical and ongoing inequality and petition federal and state governments and corporations for redress and the development of more equitable political and economic arrangements going forward. For instance, the county could sue the state for decades of under-resourcing Black majority K-12 schools during the Jim Crow Era. Maryland’s historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are doing this. The case is currently in court-ordered mediation (Seltzer 2019).

## ***Case of Disrespect #3: PGC is the “Sink” for D.C. Region Gentrification Effects***

*How PGC Could Change the Game:* Advocate for regional resource distribution and other measures to ameliorate the negative consequences of regional fragmentation, the origins and continuation of which are significantly race and class inflected. In particular, PGC elected officials, in coordination with D.C. region colleagues, should work toward tax levies to support the region’s economically distressed populations. A regional tax, alongside a regional minimum wage, could be designed to support low-income households to ensure their basic needs are met, regardless of where they live—thus attenuating the burden borne by the least wealthy locales, where the region’s poor tend to cluster because those areas are the most affordable. Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the primary D.C. area body coordinating regional activities and through which local jurisdiction leaders meet regularly, has identified “social equity” as a concern in its Region Forward planning priorities (Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments 2018). Pursuing a regional minimum wage and regional tax would make this commitment concrete.

## **Policies and Political Activities Oriented Toward Race and Class Equity**

***Policy #1: Increase State Funding to Support Local Governments.*** Local leaders, with few (short-term) alternatives, tend to compete with each other for direct private investment and state funding. Such competition often leads to tepid, if any, increases in public well being, especially among historically marginalized groups. Cooperation is an alternative to competition, an agenda local leaders could negotiate among themselves and take to their respective state houses and governors to make the case for increased state support to local governments for public goods and services provision. As a society—voters particularly—need to *empower leaders* to do this. Concomitant grassroots and elected official-driven energy devoted to public education regarding the vital role local and state government play or could play in providing public goods and services equitably could increase public receptiveness toward more robust government.

***Policy #2: Make a Case for Higher Taxes.*** Since the 1980s, all levels of government have enacted significant personal and corporate tax cuts, decreasing government capacity to provide public goods and services (with the exception of law enforcement and military spending). Consequently, there is less money in government coffers for social programs (Harvey 2007). When enacting tax increases, government officials should not only seek to raise revenue, but to create mechanisms protecting public interests, particularly those of groups historically harmed, such as racial and ethnic minorities.

***Policy #3: Hold Financial Actors Accountable for Household and Community-Level Harms.*** The Great Recession did not just harm families; it dashed the hopes of entire communities. Yet neither families nor communities have been made whole by market bad actors. While the federal government back stopped toxic assets to prevent financial industry implosion, it did comparatively little to support families and neighborhoods.

***Policy #4: Create a Black Equity Fund.*** Black people have experienced centuries of racist government and market practices. In the past 10 years, mainstream policy officials and public intellectuals have increasingly discussed “reparations” for harms.