



Two Trenton's: Resource Rich, yet Left Behind

By: Lauren Elle Darby

This past weekend, I had the opportunity to travel to the city of Trenton with a team of researchers for the first time. After researching this city for the past two months, I'd heard about differences in treatment across wards but had expected it to be a gradual shift as you explore the town. I envisioned the state's capital to be prosperous with signs of wealth across the buildings yet with an old-town charm. What I found was not far from my initial expectations. Certain parts of the town were wealthier with notes of prosperity shining in the fresh paint jobs and paved over roads. However, when you travel across to different wards the difference is drastic. Burnt down buildings, wood that needs to be replaced, overgrown grass. For the state's capitol, I was shocked at the fact that these two realities could intertwine.

Trenton's issue is not a lack of resources, the city is thriving financially with the means to support itself, it is the distribution and how they are used. Trenton has the resources and diversity to become one of New Jersey's most civically engaged cities, yet those strengths aren't translating to outcomes.

In walking around the city, I noticed an extremely diverse population with a wide range of people. From soul food, Caribbean hair places, and much more the city is bustling with diverse ideas. Even visiting the kid's section of the public library, you see signs of African-American culture on full display with graffiti signs on the wall, books of some of the most influential Black-Americans being highlighted, and magazines on how to maintain curly hair. The city doesn't just recognize its ethnic community, it embraces it. Yet when you leave different parts of town and travel to different signs you see a different sort of division through class. As my team and I walked from ward to ward we would see the economic decline. This would be displayed through the infrastructure with worn down houses and vacant properties. It was clear that certain parts of the city were being distributed a higher amount of funding than others.

Over the past few months, my team and I have been monitoring Trenton's budget and how the funds are being distributed. It's clear to me that they have a plentiful supply of resources yet when you look at the data it's clear that more than half of the budget is being used for city government, while the rest is thinly spread for the citizens. This isn't just an issue I've noticed as an outsider but at most city council meetings, at least one resident will speak and refer to the budget or issues in the community that require funding to solve it. Thus, when you look at the budget allocation and the city itself you can tell the issues in distribution are clear as the city fails to help its poorer residents.

Moreover, while this issue is about Trenton's residents the same could be argued for cities across the country. Cities will have the resources needed to create a better quality of life for all residents yet improperly distribute them for a variety of interests. A city's success isn't defined by what it has, but by how effectively it connects people to its resources. In a town that serves as the state's capital it highlights how this issue may go beyond Trenton into smaller cities with even smaller budgets. Yet if some of those smaller cities are all to provide a better quality of life for its residents, why can't Trenton?

As I left Trenton, I remained optimistic of its potential. The city used to once serve as the nation's capital and more recently was a manufacturing hub for most of the country. Yet its decline is concerning and is linked to the improper distribution of its funds. As is the case for many historical cities, I imagine that its older population has lived in the city for many years and has watched this shift and seen the potential of it. In talking to some of the residents I know that the current Trenton does not serve as a proper representation for what it could be. Thus, if Trenton already has the foundation, the question isn't if it can thrive but rather why hasn't it yet?