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Racial and Social Justice Voices and Stories in our Community

Jibril Solomon and Taylor Hall

Introduction

Over the past few years, America has seen a substantial increase in community activism due to blatant racial and social injustices across the nation. Ordinary citizens have protested against varied forms of injustices plaguing their communities. Numerous grassroots organizations formed, advocated for, and created change, advancing residents' rights to more inclusive and just lives. Locally, two organizations, Diversity and Inclusion for Community Empowerment (DICE) and the Bridgewater Communities for Civil Rights (BCCR), have been organized to challenge social and racial injustices on behalf of the residents of Bridgewater and Raynham.



BCCR is a community-based organization dedicated to educating residents and the greater community about the value of diversity, the richness of cultural differences, and the sanctity of human rights (www.bccrcivilrights.org/about). DICE is a network of individuals and community groups committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in local cities and towns (www.dicemassachusetts.com/about). To understand the impacts of identity-based discrimination related to race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, disability, mental health and/or sizeism on the Bridgewater-Raynham community, DICE and BCCR collected stories and data from over three hundred diverse residents in 2019, held

community listening sessions in 2020, and created a survey in 2021, which is the focus of this research essay.

Background

The United States Constitution protects people's right to protest. From the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, to the current MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, grassroots organizations across the country have been instruments of advocacy, civil rights, and social and racial justice that have transformed the culture, values, and policies of the nation. Social scientists have found that social movement organizations (SMOs), such as DICE and BCCR, are one of the most effective social instruments for achieving civil rights for all. One of the main

goals of SMOs is "to promote or counter changes to the existing social order" (Briscoe and Gupta 2016, 5). SMOs, by challenging social standards that violate citizens' civil and human rights, can impact policy, and create the forces necessary for social change (Burstein and Linton 2002).

The Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s birthed major legislative actions and laws that permanently changed American society. The contemporary Black Lives Matter movement continues the fight for racial and social justice. DICE and BCCR have embraced these activist traditions and embarked on journeys as forces for social change inspired by the ethics of care theory. Carol Gilligan (1982) writes that the ethics of care theory "starts from the premise that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence."

Data Results and Analysis

To give voice to the racial and social justice stories and experiences of Bridgewater-Raynham community



I pledge to:

- Educate** myself on racial justice issues.
- Show** sensitivity to the use of racist stereotypes.
- Display** courage in the presence of racial injustice.
- Call out** racism where and when it occurs.
- Support** public policies that promote racial equality.

Pledge adapted from
<https://www.ywcahartford.org/take-the-pledge-to-stand-against-racism/page.html>

Image 1: From www.bccrcivilrights.org.

members, DICE and BCCR held community listening sessions and conducted a survey asking residents about their perceptions about inclusiveness, experiences and observations about identity-based mistreatment, and sense of the two-town leadership and school administrative procedures and policies for addressing racial and social injustice instances in the community.

A random sample of 135 residents completed the survey questionnaire. Among them, 77% were from Bridgewater and 23% from Raynham. About 83% of respondents are white, just over 7% are Black/African American, almost 4.5% mixed/multiracial, 1.5% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.5% Asian and under 1% Native American. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65 years and older. The gender breakdown is close to 70% female, 28% male, and 2% nonbinary and other.

Survey participants were asked: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how inclusive regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, disability, mental health, and sizeism do you find the Bridgewater-Raynham community?"

Over 65% of participants found the Bridgewater-Raynham community not inclusive, while about 35% perceived the community as inclusive. Most respondents think that our community is only moderately inclusive, indicating that we have work to do to include and value all citizens.

"Have you ever experienced or witnessed identity-based mistreatment in the Bridgewater-Raynham community?"

Approximately 70% of participants reported experiencing or witnessing identity-based mistreatment in the Bridgewater-Raynham communities, with 22% saying they've never experienced or witnessed identity-based

mistreatment and 9% saying they're not sure or cannot recall such experiences.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with town and school officials on addressing the topic of diversity and inclusion?"

56% of respondents are not satisfied with their town and school officials' approach to addressing diversity and inclusion, 22% are satisfied with the approach, and 17% find themselves moderately satisfied with the town and school officials' approach to the topic of diversity and inclusion.

"Rate how much you agree or disagree that you are informed about the school

More than 50% of all respondents said that their issue was not addressed nor were they satisfied with the steps taken by the town and school officials as a follow up.

"Share your stories related to identity-based discrimination." After coding participants' stories, the most common instances of identity-based discrimination were:

Race-based discrimination with 36% of all respondents mentioning experiencing or witnessing it; gender identity/sexual discrimination with 26%; sizeism/body size discrimination and shaming with 15%; disability and socioeconomic status combined, 10%.

Although the sample size of over 135 resident participants is small, it is representative of the demographics of the community, and offers voices and stories of residents that warrant attention and actions for change.

and town processes, procedures, and policies for addressing any issues of discrimination."

61% of respondents disagree that they are informed, 25% agree that they are informed and 24% neither agree nor disagree about being informed by their school and town processes, procedures, and policies for addressing issues of discrimination.

"Were you satisfied with how town managers and/or school officials addressed your reported concerns regarding experiencing or witnessing identity-based mistreatment?"

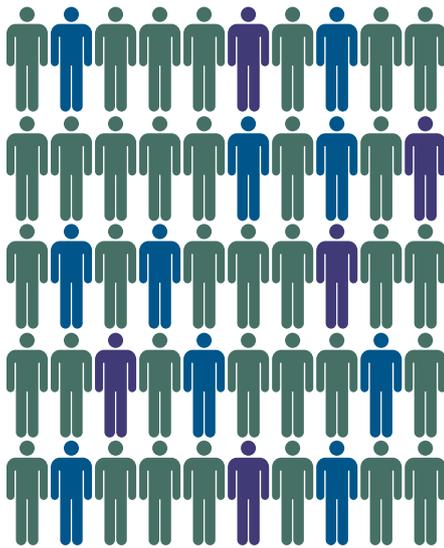
Overall, 70% of the Bridgewater-Raynham resident survey respondents indicated experiencing or witnessing identity-based mistreatment in the community.

Furthermore, the Bridgewater-Raynham survey participants offered some particularly poignant personal stories about their own experiences with identity-based discrimination in the community. Stories related to racial mistreatment:

"BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Color] students and faculty being followed in stores (Roche Bros)

Have you experienced or witnessed identity-based mistreatment:

Bridgewater-Raynham



70% Yes
20% No
10% Not Sure/Cannot Recall

by customer representatives; police stopping Black drivers and asking students to get out of cars for minor infringements (e.g., a headlight out) incurring fear in students. This happens both on and off campus.”

“There were a few moments of discomfort with the BR [Bridgewater-Raynham] school system regarding inclusion and diversity. My sophomore year, there was an entire musical done in black face and no one cared.”

“There was an incident with a high school teacher who posted racially negative comments on Instagram and although it was brought to BR admin by students and parents nothing was done other than telling the teacher not to do it again.”

“I just arrived in Bridgewater at my new home and a Bridgewater Cop took a turn behind me into my driveway damaging his police vehicle. He exited his vehicle and stated that we got into an accident. I replied no “we” did not, and he radioed in for help after asking

for my license and registration. When his commanding officer arrived and ask what happened and I explained it to him he addresses me as if it was my fault and yelled at me in front of my children and neighboring children.”

Stories related to gender/sexual orientation mistreatment:

“I was the owner of the daycare program — before coming out as a trans man. I was harassed and pushed out by the current owner... I was not covered by employee protection so there was nothing to be done but I believe people should be aware this childcare program is not a safe place for all.”

“I can remember another particular student that was regularly made fun of for being black, gay, and special needs. I witnessed, on multiple occasions, peers make fun of him for his individuality and diversity. This is the culture that

“I was cornered in the bathroom and called the f slur for gay people because I identify as bisexual. When I told my school, nothing was done and the people who did that got away with it.”

“I think BR has to do a much better job of addressing diversity whether it be race, sexuality, etc. because it’s simply a breeding ground to create racists and white supremacists if they don’t start addressing it.”

Stories related to sizeism mistreatment:

“I regularly witnessed acts of discrimination while at BR. There were several groups of people that would regularly fat shame individuals in my class.”

“Another instance of sizeism that happened when I went to BR.... It seemed like plus sized girls were monitored for dress code violations more often than girls who wore smaller sizes.”

One of the main goals of SMOs is “to promote or counter changes to the existing social order” ... SMOs, by challenging social standards that violate citizens’ civil and human rights, can impact policy, and create the forces necessary for social change.

was allowed to pervade BR as there were not effective feedback loops in place to mitigate unacceptable behavior.”

“We were also told we shouldn’t go to prom together because it was inappropriate, when straight girls were able to go to prom together without opposition.”

“I have seen many plus sized individuals get dress coded for minuscule things. whereas individuals who are considered “skinny” are overlooked.”

Stories related to ability/different ability mistreatment:

“I did witness some students making fun of others who had autism for the way that they talked or acted.”

Social scientists have found that social movement organizations (SMOs), such as DICE and BCCR, are one of the most effective social instruments for achieving civil rights for all.



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“Individuals with disabilities are not included sufficiently, sidewalks, streets and many buildings are not all accessible. Transportation is limited. The Town unfortunately has groups that can be reluctant to be open to all.”

“My personal problems and experiences with BR have to do with how they approach mental health. I was on a sports team and my coaches were pretty psychology abusive. They were very manipulative, put way too much pressure on me and my teammates, and oftentimes would encourage behaviors that would make teammates hate one another.”

Overall, the survey data and personal stories reported provide some insights on the racial and social justice voices and stories in the Bridgewater-Raynham community. Although the sample size of over 135 resident participants is small, it is representative of the demographics of the community, and offers voices and stories of residents that warrant attention and actions for change.

Conclusions

The findings provide compelling evidence of social justice issues related to racism, sizeism, homophobia, discrimination, disability, and socioeconomic status in the Bridgewater-Raynham community. The most prevalent forms of mistreatments reported were race-based at 36%, homophobia at 26%,

sizeism or the prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of a person’s size or weight at 15%, and mental, physical disabilities combined with low-socio-economic status at 10%.

In the face of these injustices, residents acknowledged incongruities they have seen between their mistreatments and the actions, policies, and efforts of local officials to mitigate and remedy their circumstances. Over 55% reported their identity-based discriminations were never addressed by local leaders. Over 70% indicated that they were not satisfied with how the town leaders and school officials paid attention to issues and concerns of diversity and inclusion in the community. Close to 60% of residents felt uninformed and unaware of the work of local officials to address discrimination, racial and social injustices occurring in their community.

Thus, it is reasonable to infer from these findings that: (1) the Bridgewater-Raynham community has some work to do to address racial and social injustice; (2) community leaders are challenged to become more aware and knowledgeable, and to act on policies, practices, and procedures to educate, inform, and protect the civil rights of its residents; and (3) community grassroots advocacy organizations, in concert with local officials and stakeholders, must work together to eradicate the identity-based discrimination in Bridgewater-Raynham.



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