

A Short Primer on Long Island's Need

LONG ISLAND is often depicted in movies and TV as a wealthy enclave of upscale communities with top-notch schools, beautiful beaches and palatial homes. That picture does exist, but for the majority of the 2.8 million residents of Nassau and Suffolk counties the reality is quite different.

As has been noted in multiple studies, **suburbs have become the new centers of poverty in the U.S.** This is particularly true of communities in Nassau and Suffolk counties, which struggle economically, are burdened with poor transportation systems, food deserts, a lack of access to quality childcare, and whose safety nets are precarious.

Part of what has created this is the **multiplicity of divisions on Long Island.** Areas that had once been one community were divided decades ago into separate villages and school districts, and with that came **huge wealth gaps between communities.** For example, between Garden City and Hempstead you can step across a street that divides the two school districts and incorporated villages and be shocked by the contrast. In Garden City, the median household income is \$172,000 and 2.5% of residents are below the poverty line. In Hempstead, the median income is \$62,000 and a staggering 28% of children under 18 live in poverty.

Long Island's population has changed significantly too in the last 20 years, as reflected in **increasing migration patterns, especially from Central America.** Right now, there are approximately 527,000 immigrants living in both counties, according to the latest four-year average from Census surveys, and the Migration Policy Institute estimates that 100,000 of those are undocumented. **We are also an aging suburb.** Long Island's senior population has grown by 34% since 2000, the highest rate in the region.

With all of these changes there's been a **significant rise in the percentage of children qualifying for free or reduced lunch.** In high poverty Long Island schools, the share of students depending on free

lunch grew from 55% in 2001 to 82% in 2016. Overall 24% of all school-age children in the two counties in 2015 qualified for free or reduced lunch.

It is not only the poor who suffer. A majority of residents who would in other regions be considered middle class are also struggling. For a family of four to rent a two-bedroom apartment and cover just the basic necessities of rent, utilities, food, childcare and transportation, an hourly wage of \$30.44 is needed. Yet in Nassau and Suffolk Counties the average hourly wage is \$12.96 and \$13.65, respectively. It is not surprising that **60% of Long Islanders responded to a Long Island Index survey and said it is difficult for them to pay their rent or mortgage.**

The connections between Long Island and the larger metropolitan New York City area are multiple and complex. A full 30% of Nassau's workforce and 11% of Suffolk's are commuters, and over 300,000 New Yorkers commute to Long Island to work in the universities, businesses and schools across the two counties. The boundaries separating the five boroughs from the two counties are human-made and porous. Just as pollution does not distinguish between borders, nor do public health issues stop at the Queens and Nassau County line.

We are already **witnessing more and more Long Islanders turning to food pantries** and other social services to help see them through these challenging times. According to the Health and Welfare Council and other Long Island social service agencies, all Long Islanders are going to feel the effects of the pandemic, but none more so than those living paycheck to paycheck, the vulnerable elderly, poor families with small children, and those living on the extreme margins, including immigrants, the homeless, and those living with chronic health and mental health conditions.

Despite the size of the need on Long Island, **there are few foundations that base their philanthropy in the region.** Compared with New York City, Long Island does not have the philanthropic sector or heft that's required to respond to an emergency of this nature. We are appealing to those partners located in neighboring New York City and further afield to help address the sizeable need to be found here.

Note: The Rauch Foundation published the Long Island Index from 2004-2018. The Index was a non-partisan compilation of facts about how the region was changing and what could be done to address regional challenges.