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King County Council puts race on the table for examination

Council members went to the Pacific Science Center to see the exhibit, “Race: Are We So Different?” and it has prompted a valuable discussion because how people think about race affects almost all issues confronting the government.



By Jerry Large

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The Metropolitan King County Council went on a field trip Monday to get a better grip on a difficult subject.

The council wants to encourage a better understanding of what the concept of race means and doesn't mean so that government and residents will be better able to address its negative consequences.

It chose a good place to begin, spending Monday morning at the Pacific Science Center in Seattle where Bryce Siedl, the center's CEO, led council members and other officials on a brief tour of the exhibit, “RACE: Are We So Different?”.

“Race evokes emotion,” Councilmember Julia Patterson said in a meeting she chaired after the tour. “We feel guilty. We feel angry. We feel sorrow. And we might just feel we just don't know how to talk about it.”

Talking about it is important though, because how people think about race affects almost all issues government deals with.

In October, the county released its second Equity and Social Justice annual report, which captured in numbers wide gaps in health, wealth and school-graduation rates that correlate with race or with geographic patterns that reflect racial segregation.

The report said: “The 10 ZIP codes with the highest diversity have more than 7 in 10 people of color” while the 10 ZIP codes with the lowest diversity have, on average, fewer than 1 of every 10. There are strong connections between place, race, health and income.

Government — and the public whose support it requires — needs to understand the role race plays in creating or sustaining inequalities in order to improve the prospects for more residents.

People often have been misinformed about race, Patterson said. That's where the exhibit comes in.

The exhibit shows that race is not a valid biological concept. It explains how the American concept of race arose and changed over time, with help from some bad science in the past.

Siedl explained that our skin color or hair texture say nothing about any other aspect of who we are. But skin color has been used as an excuse for economic exploitation and discrimination for so long that it's become embedded in our institutions and in our brains.

Recent science shows how even people who are consciously anti-racist may think and act in ways that contradict their conscious intent because the unconscious social ideas about what race means are so powerful. Individuals, businesses and governments are all affected. Patterson said, "Perceptions on race do have significant impact on policy at all levels of government."

Here's a section from the county equity report that talks about the criminal-justice system:

"Last year in King County, people who are African American represented 30 percent of all bookings even though they only represent seven percent of the total population."

Similarly, according to the Sentencing Project, "three-fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color.

"More alarmingly, in Seattle, blacks were more than 21 times more likely to be arrested for selling serious drugs than whites in 2005-2006, despite the fact that multiple data sources suggest that whites are the majority of sellers and users of serious drugs in Seattle.

"The outcomes for youth are no better. According to King County juvenile detention data, two-thirds of all individuals booked in 2012 were youth of color. Of this, 40 percent of the youth were black and almost 14 percent were Latino."

Maybe you've read Michelle Alexander's book, "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness." If you haven't, you should because it will help you understand how the criminal-justice system (and media coverage) perpetuate racial inequality.

Last week, I participated in a discussion convened by county judges who are concerned about the way race distorts our justice system. King County Superior Court officials have been reading and discussing the book as part of their search for solutions to the problems they see daily. The book points out that with most crimes, police react to a particular incident. They look for the specific person who committed a specific robbery, burglary, homicide and so on.

With drugs there is a lot of discretion about where to look, who to stop and search. Enforcement is largely a matter of choice in the case of low-level use and selling, which is how it can be that the majority of users and sellers can be white and the majority of people arrested black or brown. To try to mitigate those racial disparities, the county and Seattle have a pilot diversion program for people arrested on drug charges, called LEAD, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion. It gives police another kind of discretion in the case of low-level drug or prostitution cases.

The people arrested may be the same, but police can direct some of them to community-based services rather than hauling them off to jail. It is not the ultimate answer to unequal justice, but it's a good program because it gets more people into treatment.

I was heartened by the judges' search for solutions and pleased Monday by the presence of King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg; Sheriff John Urquhart; Corinna Harn, District Court presiding judge; and her Superior Court counterpart Richard McDermott, along with numerous other county officials.

County Executive Dow Constantine, speaking Monday, said King County's "core commitment as a government is that every person will have the opportunity to succeed, to flourish ..."

Making that happen is not just up to government. I encourage you to see the Science Center's race exhibit, which runs through Jan. 5. The council will continue its discussion at its Dec. 5 meeting.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com