

# Justice & Advocacy



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## Justice & Advocacy Committee

The Lehigh Conference of Churches

An occasional newsletter for our Lehigh Valley church congregations

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– See the Justice & Advocacy website for additional references and resources related to these stories

What justice and/or advocacy issues has your church worked on lately? We'd love to feature your story!

Justice & Advocacy News  
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http://ja.pprj.org

## Berks Immigrant Detention Center is Empty

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.* - Leviticus 19:33-34

The 2014 sexual assault of a 19 year-old mother by a staff member at Berks County Detention Center in Leesport, PA Berks sparked an 8-year campaign to shut down the facility. At last Berks is now empty—a time for celebration; yet thousands of immigrants are still being detained and abused in almost 200 jails and detention centers across the U.S., including Pennsylvania’s Moshannon immigrant prison.

The irony of America’s broken immigration system is that the foundation of our economic prosperity has been the hard work of immigrants –voluntary and involuntary—and the exploitation of people of many nations whose citizens are now seeking refuge here. Too often churches have been complicit in America’s xenophobic and racist policies which contribute to a national political climate of fear, violence, greed, and despair. Now is the time for repentance and reparations.

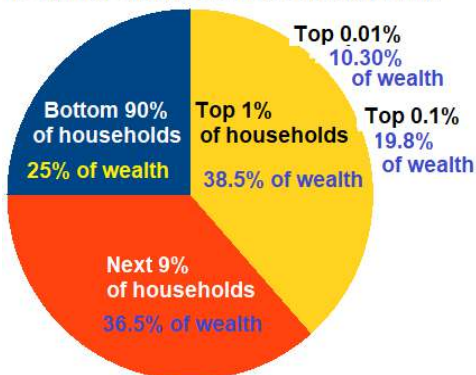
## The Cost of Affordable Housing Racism, Inequality and the Housing Crisis

by Robert Walden

There are many factors that contribute to the current shortage of affordable housing and rising number of homeless people, as reported in the last issue of this newsletter (Nov. 2022), but fundamentally, the current housing crisis is one symptom of our nation’s high and rising inequality and racial disparity in income and wealth.<sup>[1]</sup>

It has been well documented<sup>[2]</sup> that growing inequality leads to reduced life expectancy and higher infant mortality, to poor educational attainment, lower social mobility and increased levels of violence and mental illness. Almost from the time that Europeans began arriving in the New World, the American economy was dependent on land expropriated from native Americans and the African slave trade which provided workers for southern plantations.

Wealth Inequality: How personal wealth is shared among U.S. households (2021).



The richest 1% of U.S. households hold more wealth than the bottom 90%

Source: Realtime Inequality: realtimeinequality.org

(continued on page 2).

## Cost of Housing ... (continued from page 1)

African Americans, in particular have been persistently exploited by unjust economic practices. Following the U.S. Civil War, the liberated people were not compensated nor given any assistance for the transition to their freedom – so that many were forced to become sharecroppers for the landowners who were their former slavemasters. The only reparations paid were federal government payments as compensation to the “owners” of enslaved people for their “loss of property,” under the D.C. Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862.

The New Deal provided financing for suburban housing for white middle- and lower-class families, beginning in the 1930's, but African-American families were prohibited by the FHA from buying those homes, and so lost out on the appreciated value of those homes that benefitted white families. Following World War II, similar provisions in the GI Bill effectively excluded African-American veterans from most of its benefits.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent legislation outlawed the redlining practices that kept African Americans from moving into white suburban neighborhoods, but racist practices by realtors, lenders, and landlords have not yet entirely ended.

African Americans in particular were targeted for subprime mortgages leading up to the Great Recession of 2007-2009. Cheap credit and lax lending standards fueled a housing bubble, and when it burst, the banks were left holding trillions of dollars of worthless investments in subprime mortgages.

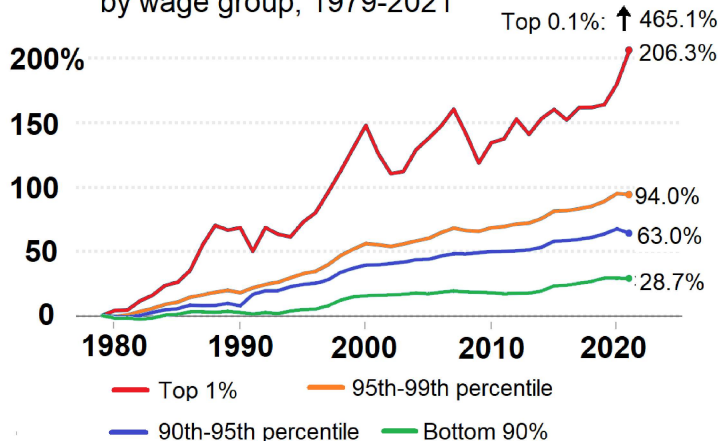
For several years following the financial market crash, there were dozens of foreclosed homes across the Lehigh Valley.

Financial assistance programs and the moratorium on foreclosures and evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have kept many families from losing their homes, but that is starting to change.

The Pennsylvania Homeowner Assistance Fund (PHAF), launched in February 2022 with \$350 million in federal funding, covers mortgage and utility debt, delinquent

## Earnings Inequality Continues to Grow

Cumulative percent change in real annual wages, by wage group, 1979-2021



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Kipczuk, Saez, and Song, "Uncovering the American Dream: Inequality and Mobility in Social Security Earnings Data Since 1937" (2007) and Social Security Administration wage statistics. Economic Policy Institute

property taxes, and other housing costs, as well as ongoing mortgage payments. However the program has been overwhelmed by demand, and many applicants are extremely frustrated with the application process, months-long delays, and utility shut-offs while waiting for assistance.<sup>[3]</sup>

## What 's Coming Next: More Demand for Housing

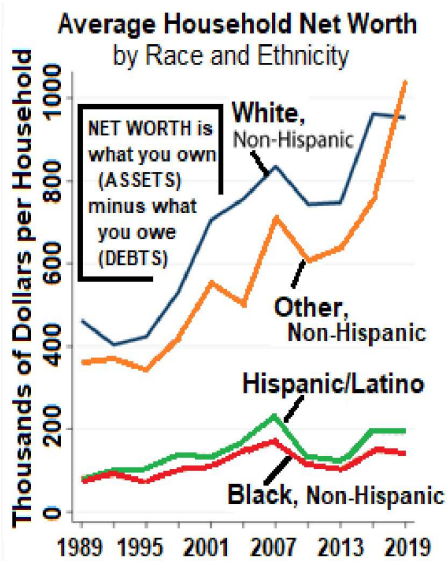
Lehigh Valley population is about 700,000 in 2023 and growing at a rate of almost 0.5% per year – about 3,300 additional people for whom 1,300 new housing units will be needed every year; and affordable housing is high on the priority list of many Lehigh Valley elected officials.

This year the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) will be working with local governments and partner organizations, developers, lenders and other stake-holders across the region to convene a multi-event housing summit intended to develop a housing supply and attainability strategy. This project, which appears to be unique to the Lehigh Valley, brings together construction planning, land use regulation, and financial planning – analyzing how many homes are needed at various price points and where they should be built, while engaging builders and financial institutions to ensure plans are achievable.

## U.S. Plan to End Homelessness

Last month the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness released an updated strategic plan<sup>[4]</sup> “to prevent and end homelessness,” with the goal of reducing homelessness by 25% by January 2025. That is a step in the right direction if it can be accomplished, but not a very ambitious goal for the world’s richest nation.

The USICH plan identifies 30 strategies to address the shortage of affordable housing and homeless shelters; to address racial discrimination; .... (continued on page 4)



Source: Federal Reserve Board, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/wealth-inequality-and-the-racial-wealth-gap-20211022.htm>

## At the Border in Douglas and Agua Prieta Water Walk in the Desert - Part 2

*Sheila Clever attended The Borderlands Learning Tour hosted by the Mennonite Central Committee in May 2022.*

*Here is a reflection from one of the educational opportunities she participated in.*

What is really a miracle is that some people make it to this desert we are standing in.

Brian Best works with the Tucson Samaritans. He used to be the Executive Director of BorderLinks. There were lots of dirt roads where we walked; the land is mapped for sale. We were 60 miles from the Mexico border. Samaritans monitor 40 miles along the Mexican border near Nogales and up to Tucson.

Samaritans work with other organizations – BorderLinks, No More Deaths, Here We Grieve. The Here We Grieve organization collects bodies in the desert. They work to discover who the bodies might be and link them to a list of missing persons. No More Deaths leaves jugs of water in the desert. Borderlinks provides interactive educational experiences to teach about life on the border and the difficulties of migration.

What do we find in the desert? There are back packs, shoes, food wrappers. We also find bras, indicating a woman was probably raped. Sadly, it is quite common to find bras.



Brian asked us to try and walk a straight line in the desert. It was impossible. There are cacti everywhere, of many different species. I set my eyes on an object that I was told was straight north. I immediately ran into a cactus. Walking around the cactus, I tried to find the object I was walking towards again. Then I encountered a ravine – the desert is not level. I searched for a place to cross and tried to find my “north.” I had lost it that quickly. And we were doing this in the daytime, when we could actually see the obstacles, and with good shoes. And also, not being chased by a

predator.

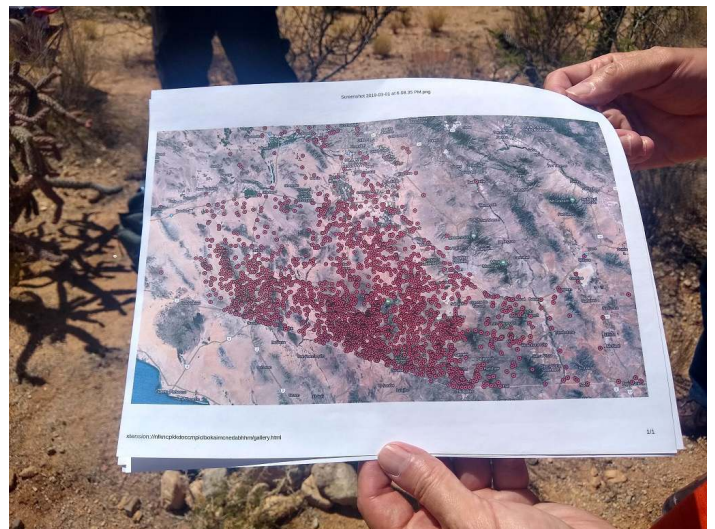


We were guided to a cross in the desert by Brian. This cross marks the spot where Jose Luis Cruz Cruz was found on April 10, 2011. He was 41 years old.

This cross, to the person who put it there, is not a holy symbol. He wants everyone to remember the original meaning of the cross – that it was an instrument of torture. Forcing people into the

desert is a means of torture. This cross marks where dreams have died.

Brian showed us a map of Arizona covered with red dots. The dots mark the spots where bodies have been found in the desert. The border with Mexico is clearly defined by a line of red dots. The red dots stretch up to Phoenix. Samaritans have found 3600 bodies over the past 20+ years. They have marked each spot where a body has been found with GPS coordinates. In 2020, there were 226 bodies found in Arizona alone.



The attempts to stop migration have failed. Central Americans, who were the bulk of border-crossers in 2018, haven't been allowed to cross the border in two years. But migration is a world wide issue. The nationalities we see now have changed. Many come from South America and Cuba – and Senegal.

### Migrant Death Mapping Project

<https://humaneborders.org/migrant-death-mapping/>

## Cost of Housing ... (continued from page 2)

to provide housing with supportive services for people with mental disabilities or/and substance use disorders; improve coordination of programs between federal, state, and local agencies; and prevent evictions and foreclosures so that people don't become homeless in the first place.

For example, there are strategies to:

– improve **access to federal housing assistance** programs. While some federal housing programs are targeted to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, most are offered more broadly to low-income people. The number of people eligible for federal housing assistance far exceeds the available funding, and many people in need of such assistance wait years, often falling into or struggling to get out of homelessness in the meantime.

– begin to close the **housing supply gap** over the next five years: Nationally, there are only 37 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income renters. In no state can a person working full-time at the federal minimum wage afford a two-bedroom apartment at the fair market rent.

– **enforce the Fair Housing Act** and combat other forms of housing discrimination that perpetuate disparities in homelessness. Despite passage and implementation of the federal Fair Housing Act in 1968, many people still face systemic housing discrimination.

With the current gridlock in Congress and the Pennsylvania General Assembly, it remains to be seen what progress is possible this year, but we must continue to work for justice!

1. *A Rising Tide Drowns Unstable Boats: How Inequality Creates Homelessness*, (AAPSS April 2, 2021)  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002716220981864>
2. See, for example, *Exposing the impact of social inequality*, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson  
<https://www.york.ac.uk/research/impact/social-inequality/>
3. *The Waiting Game*, (Spotlight PA, Jan. 23, 2023)  
<https://www.spotlightpa.org/news/2023/01/pa-homeowner-mortgage-utility-assistance-fund/>
4. *All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* (USICH: Dec. 19, 2022)  
[https://www.usich.gov/All\\_In\\_The\\_Federal\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_to\\_Prevent\\_and\\_End\\_Homelessness.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/All_In_The_Federal_Strategic_Plan_to_Prevent_and_End_Homelessness.pdf)

### • **Mental Health in Schools - Needs Assessment**

In 2021, around 40% of Pennsylvania middle and high school students felt depressed, 31% were at-risk for suicide, and 11% attempted suicide at least once. This report describes the situation in the Lehigh Valley, including response by local school districts.

(Lehigh Valley Justice Institute: Nov. 16, 2022)

The report is posted at <https://www.lvji.org/resources>.

• also see:

[[LehighValleyLive summary of the LVJI report above](#)]

## Beyond Incarceration webinar series

(four Tuesdays at 7:30pm: Feb. 7, 21; March 7, 21)

“A hard look at dismantling the prison system and building healthy communities,” organized by the Mennonite Central Committee. Learn about the ways faith communities are actively understanding and working against these complex systems of confinement. The webinars will be followed by learning tour opportunities in different parts of the U.S. in 2023. Register once and participate in one or all of the webinars. See details and registration at: <https://mcc.org/get-involved/events/beyond-incarceration-webinar-series>



- **February 7 at 7:30pm: Proclaim:** How do we develop an historical/systemic understanding of mass incarceration and what is our Christian mandate to respond?
- **February 21 at 7:30pm Intervene:** How do we interrupt and intervene in systems of mass incarceration?
- **March 7 at 7:30pm Create:** How do we imagine and bring about alternative systems?
- **March 21 at 7:30pm Practice:** What does proclaiming, intervening and creating alternative systems to mass incarceration look like in practice?

## Resources: Responding to Racism & Violence

- “Reimagining King’s Vision - The Fierce Urgency of Now” (webinar, recorded Jan. 15, 2023) From Ukraine to Uvalde we see the crises of which Rev. Dr. King warned, militarism, materialism, racism and the prospect of spiritual death; and this webinar addresses how we may better work for peace. Presenters are Medea Benjamin,, Ash-Lee Henderson , Tiffany Loftin, Rev. Liz Theoharis), and Luis Rodriguez. Watch the recording at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8DDPwvn0a8>  
Event description: <https://www.codepink.org/01152023>
- **Past, Present, Future: Ancestry and the Work Ahead** (POWER Interfaith webinar; recorded 1/16/23) discussion around Lisa Sharon Harper's new book *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World and How to Repair It All*. Moderated by Rev. Mark Tyler and Dr. Rev. Stephen Ray. "Fortune helps readers understand how America was built upon systems and structures that blessed some and cursed others, allowing Americans of European descent to benefit from the colonization, genocide, enslavement, rape, and exploitation of people of color." Watch the recording at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sdYZT2jhFY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sdYZT2jhFY)