

Editorial, 8/26: Lincoln Must Address Race, Income Gaps

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Lincoln finds itself on an enviable number of “best of” lists, a point of pride for any city.

The Journal Star recently compiled a summary of lists in which Lincoln ranks among the top 10 cities for travel, families, renting, buying homes, flipping houses, working hard, labor participation, unemployment, tech jobs and effective minimum wage, among others. In 2013, Gallup named Lincoln the best city in the entire country for wellbeing.

Despite its many positives, Lincoln has a number of shortcomings to address, particularly along the lines of race and income. To ensure every one of the city’s estimated 280,364 residents – regardless of ethnic heritage, ZIP code or socioeconomic status – has the same access to improve themselves and families, Lincoln must aim to close these gaps for the benefit of all.

The annual Lincoln Vital Signs report, released Wednesday, details areas where Lincoln can improve by providing a broad snapshot of the community’s wellbeing, along with drilldowns on economy and workforce, basic needs, education, health and safety.

Among Lincoln’s most troubling opportunity gaps are those of geography. The 142-page document details a disparity of life expectancy of nearly 21 years between neighborhoods. Five census tracts are designated as extreme poverty neighborhoods, meaning more than 40 percent of residents fall below the poverty level – up from zero in 2000, though down from seven in 2013.

Those who live in areas such high, concentrated levels of poverty have limited opportunities for social advancement and unemployment rates that generally far exceed the city at large.

Poverty rates disproportionately affect the city’s racial and ethnic minority families, who already face additional obstacles to social mobility. Parents in those groups are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, while their children have lower educational achievement than their peers.

In contrast, Lincoln boasts a great deal of traits of which residents and city leaders should be proud. The city has very low crime rates for a community its size, along with high levels of educational attainment, record low unemployment and continued population growth.

Unfortunately, this award-winning, prosperous Lincoln isn’t a reality for every family.

By no means are these simply excuses without solutions; past Vital Signs reports have established community action plans under the Prosper Lincoln initiative designed to turn the tables on the city’s shortfalls. Some areas have seen marked success, particularly reducing the

number of children in poverty and increasing median income, since the first edition was released in 2014.

Lincoln is certainly making progress at fixing its shortcomings, but such change can't be made unilaterally or overnight. The Vital Signs report paints a picture of a city deserving of its many accolades – but with work yet to do to best serve its entire populace.