Denver, CO:
A Composition of Place
Introduction

What does it mean to be “Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice”? 

In urging all Jesuits to a renewed emphasis on the mission of reconciliation and justice, the 36th General Congregation reminds us that “reconciliation is always a work of justice, a justice discerned and enacted in local communities and contexts,” (GC 36, d. 1, no. 21).

This document intends to invite Jesuit communities and works to engage in that discernment and enactment, sensitive to the ways in which God labors in their local context. By bringing to light the call for reconciliation in all its forms, “reconciliation with God, with one another, and with creation” (GC 36, d. 1, no. 21), we hope to help bring about the “profound spiritual renewal” of the Society to which God invites us in this and in all times (GC 36, d. 1, no. 18).

The study comprises two parts. Part I takes a deep look at the social and economic dimensions of Denver, a look that “allows us to understand reality more deeply and thus to serve more effectively” the people of the city (GC 36, d. 1, no. 33, quoting Adolfo Nicolás, SJ). The data below are meant to train our eyes of faith on the daily “suffering, vulnerable faces of people, indeed in the suffering of creation” in Denver (GC 36, d. 1, no. 20).

Part II presents questions that are meant to inspire reflection on how we can know and follow God’s will for us in light of the social and economic challenges of Denver set forth in Part I. By holding up the reality of the city to the call of the Gospel to attend to the cry of the poor and the earth, these questions are meant to promote “apostolic audacity” and a “generous personal response” as a life and mission (GC 36, d. 1, no. 19).
PART 1: Local Context

Population

The city of Denver is the largest city in Colorado with a population of 693,501. The city is entirely contained within Denver County, and both Denver city and county are statistically equivalent. Both Denver and Colorado are majority white, 53.3% and 69%, respectively.

Figure 1: Population: 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Change From 2011</th>
<th>Median Age</th>
<th>Youth Share</th>
<th>Female Share</th>
<th>Foreign-Born Share</th>
<th>Limited English-Speaking Share</th>
<th>Married Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>693,501</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>5,359,295</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Notes: 1 - Figure is for households reporting limited English proficiency. 2 - Figure includes persons 15 years and older.

Figure 2: Population by Race/Ethnicity

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Note: 1 - White refers to Non-Hispanic white. 2 - Hispanic/Latino persons are only included in the Hispanic/Latino category.
Religion

The number of Catholics in Denver has increased slightly by about 293 people from 2000 to 2010; however, the number of congregations has decreased by 3. Additionally the Catholic share of the Denver population dropped from 28.7% to 26.6%. The “nones” share of Denver, people who do not identify with any religious group, has increased from 46.9% to 49.2%.

Education

In Denver, about 10.7% of children (ages 5-8) attend private/parochial school. As is typical across the nation, white children are more likely than children of color to be in private schools (see Figure 4). In Denver, 23.7% of white children attend private school, compared to only 5.2% of children of color.

In Denver, educational attainment differs by race/ethnicity in ways that are similar to the national divide—minorities are more likely to be limited to a high school diploma or less, while whites are more likely than others to have a college education (see Figure 5).

In Denver, nearly 70% of all Hispanics have a high school diploma or less. That number is 39% for African-Americans and only about 16% for whites. While 45.5% of adults in Denver have a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 23.2% of African-Americans and 12.1% of Hispanics have...
reached that level of education (compared to 61.4% of whites). There are two primary reasons for this educational achievement gap. First is the lack of educational opportunities for those with limited income or who face discrimination. The second reason for the gap is the expense of higher education.

**Figure 5: Denver Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity: 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>N/A, No School</th>
<th>No H.S. Diploma or GED</th>
<th>H.S. Diploma or GED</th>
<th>Some College or Associate’s</th>
<th>Bachelor’s or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (All Races/Ethnicities)</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Note: 1- Figures include adults 25 and older.

**Today’s prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others...who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors.** – Pedro Arrupe, S.J.

Note: 1- In 1973, this address was delivered to a group of Jesuit high school alumni who were predominantly male. We have adapted the text to include “men and women” to make its powerful message applicable for a contemporary Jesuit alumni audience.
Household Income

The median household income is $61,943 in Colorado. In Denver, the median household income is $55,695, significantly higher than the median income for African-Americans, which is $36,455. For whites, the median income is the highest at $68,432, followed by other racial/ethnic groups and Hispanic/Latino households, which are $51,520 and $39,155, respectively.

Regardless of race, we know that 42% of all the income earned in Denver goes to households in the top 1/5 (quintile) of income earners. The bottom 1/5 saw just 3% of the income (similar numbers are found nationally). This income inequality significantly impacts people's lives and life chances. Figure 6 further summarizes the overall income distribution in Denver.

Figure 7 shows the percentage of racial groups in the top 20% and the bottom 20% of income earners. 25% of all white households have incomes in the top fifth of income earners, whereas only about 8.5% of black households and 7% of Hispanic households have incomes at that level. Conversely, less than 20% of white households have incomes in the bottom fifth of income earners, but about 37% of black households and 33.5% of Hispanic households have incomes that low.

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Note: Top quintile income ranges from $1,641,862-$2,051,522. 4th quintile income ranges from $1,232,030-$1,641,161. Middle quintile income ranges from $820,856-$1,230,759. 2nd quintile income ranges from $410,411-$820,565. Bottom quintile income ranges from $175-$409,679.
Wages and Unemployment

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate for the 3rd quarter of 2018 was 3.7%. For Colorado it was 3.5% and for the Denver-Metro Area it was 3.3%.

The median hourly wage in the United States is $18.12, in Colorado it is $19.66 and in the Denver-Metro Area it is $21.05.

In 2017, Colorado adopted an amendment, which increased the state minimum wage annually based on cost of living, until it reaches $12 per hour in 2020. The 2019 state minimum wage is $11.10 per hour.

Note: 1- Data on median hourly wages are for May 2017. 2- Data on minimum wage are from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.

Poverty

The official poverty threshold (a level of income below which you would be identified as “poor”) was set decades ago and has only been adjusted for inflation. The original formula is widely seen as outdated and causing a gross undercounting of the population that is truly living in poverty. For example, a family of 4 in 2016 would have to have an income below $24,300 to be considered officially poor. Despite this extremely low standard, millions of Americans and more than 125,000 people in Denver are living in poverty.

People of color are substantially more likely to be poor (see Figure 8). This is true across Colorado and the United States and is rooted in a history of racism/discrimination in virtually all areas of economic and social life—when applying for a loan, in the criminal justice system, and in education, for example. Such experiences necessarily lead to more difficult economic circumstances, including a greater likelihood of living in poverty, a problem that impacts children more than any other age group.

In Denver, 18.1% of the total population and 25.6% of children live below the poverty line. The black and Hispanic/Latino poverty rates are significantly higher than average rates. Almost 30% of African-Americans and more than 25% of Hispanic/Latinos are in poverty; child poverty rates are higher at above 45% and 33%, respectively.

Figure 8: Denver Poverty Rates by Race/Ethnicity: 2016

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates.
Homelessness

According to 2017 data from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, 17.7% of Denver’s population is homeless, and 19.7% (actual # 10,940), of the state’s population. Of the homeless population in Colorado, about 30% of them are members of families who are homeless. The homeless population has been increasing steadily since 2013.

Figure 9: Vulnerable Populations: 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Single-Parent Household Share</th>
<th>Disconnected Youth Share (Ages 16-19)</th>
<th>Housing Burdened Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Note: Figures are for children under 18 where only one parent is present. 2- “Disconnected” refers to youth who are neither in school or working. 3- “Housing Burdened” refers to households that are spending more than 30% of their income in rent or mortgage expenses.

Particularly Vulnerable Populations

The data in Figure 9 include three measurements that depict special challenges faced by many young people and families. Typically, single-parent families must make due with less income and have one parent do the household and childcare work that can be challenging even for two parents. Single-parent families, then, tend to be poorer and more stressed.

Disconnected youth are by definition not in school or employed and ultimately are at greater risk of future economic hardships.

Many families are considered to be “housing burdened”— meaning that they are paying more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage. That means less money to spend on all of the other essentials of life.

The Social Welfare System

In Denver, only about 30% of poor families receive cash assistance, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). About 42% receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly called “food stamps”). Nearly half of the people in Denver living below the poverty line receive neither cash assistance nor SNAP benefits.

The bottom line is that poor people receive little to no help. If somehow a family was able to access welfare assistance, the maximum TANF benefit in Colorado for a family with one parent and two children is $421 per month or $5,052 per year or about 24% of the poverty line ($20,780 in 2018).

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year estimates. Note: 1- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a program available to low income disabled or elderly individuals who meet certain specific eligibility requirements.

Health

According to the Colorado Health Institute, nearly 600,000 people gained health insurance coverage between 2013 and 2017 as a result of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid eligibility expansion. The uninsured rate in Colorado is 9%, about the same as the national uninsured rate, and Denver’s rate is 10%.

Figure 10: Health Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Uninsured Rate¹</th>
<th>Diabetes²</th>
<th>Obesity³</th>
<th>Excessive Drinking⁴</th>
<th>Smoking⁴</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps 2016 Notes: 1- Figures include population under 65. 2- Figures are for 2015 and include adults 20 and older. 3- Figures are for adults 20 and older. 4- Figures for adults over 18.
Birth Indicators

Rates of unintended pregnancies, abortions, and teen births have been on the decline for a number of years across the country and are at or near record lows. The unintended pregnancy, teen birth, and abortion rates are lower in Colorado than in the nation as a whole.

- About 29% of all pregnancies in Colorado are unintended. The national rate is 45%.
- The abortion rate in Colorado is 12.1 (per 1,000 women). The national rate is 14.6.
- The teen birth rate in Colorado is 17.8 (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19). The national rate is 20.3.

Infant Mortality

Infant mortality refers to babies that do not live to their first birthday. The reported rate is the number who die for every 1,000 live births. Infant mortality rates for the nation and for Colorado remain high when compared with virtually any country in the “developed world.” The infant mortality rate in Colorado is 4.8%, better than the national rate, which is 5.9%. In Colorado, the black infant mortality rate is 11.7, almost 3 times higher than the white and Hispanic/Latino infant mortality rates.

Maternal Mortality

Maternal mortality refers to deaths due to complications from pregnancy. The rate is the number per 100,000 births. The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate (20.7) in the developed world.

The Colorado rate of 11.3 is significantly lower than the national average. Maternal mortality rates in Colorado and the nation as a whole are rising.


Source: America’s Health Rankings 2018.

Figure 11: Colorado Infant Mortality Rates by Race/Ethnicity (per 100,000): 2016

- White 4
- Black 11.7
- Hispanic/Latino 4.7
- Total (All Races/Ethnicities) 4.8

Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Note: According to the CIA’s World Fact Book and the Population Reference Bureau, there are well over 40 nations with a lower infant mortality rate than the United States, and we continue to fall behind. (Examples from the Fact Book: Japan, 2.0; Ireland 3.6; Cuba, 4.4, Canada 4.5).

The Colorado rate of 11.3 is significantly lower than the national average. Maternal mortality rates in Colorado and the nation as a whole are rising.

Source: America’s Health Rankings 2018.
Drugs

Colorado, like every other state, has problems with drugs and addiction. Looking specifically at overdose death rates, we see that Colorado has less of a problem than we find nationally (see Figure 12). The overdose death rate for all drugs is 17.6 (per 100,000) and the overdose death rate for opioids is 10. Nationally, Colorado ranks 18th and 20th in overdose death rates for all drugs and opioids, respectively.

Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Note: Figures are age-adjusted.

Firearm Deaths

The United States has the highest firearm death rate in the developed world. In 2017, the rate was 12 deaths per 100,000 of the population from all firearm related causes—suicide, accidents, and homicide. In Colorado, the firearm death rate of 13.4 was higher than the national rate.

Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Note: Figures are age-adjusted.

Incarceration

Colorado has lower incarceration rates than the nation as a whole (see Figure 14). In the State, just as in the Nation, there is a significant racial gap. In Colorado, the black incarceration rate is almost 7 times higher than the rate for whites. Additionally, the black incarceration rate in Colorado is much higher than the national rate.

Source: Sentencing Project. Notes: 1 – Figures typically reflect sentences of 1 year or more. Rates are for 2016. 2 – Figures typically reflect jail sentences of less than 1 year and served in local city or county facilities. Jail inmates also include those awaiting trial. Jail incarceration rate is for 2013. 3 – Rates by race/ethnicity are for 2014.

Violence and Crime

Violent crime rates and homicide rates in Colorado are much lower than the national averages (see Figure 13). Property crimes rates, however, are significantly above the national average. Overall, crime rates in Colorado and Denver have been increasing since 2013.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2017. Notes: 1 – The rates in this chart represent the numbers of crimes reported to the police and recorded by the FBI. Most crimes go unreported, it should be noted. 2 – The property crimes here refer to Burglary, Larceny-Theft, Motor Vehicle Theft and Arson. 3 – The violent crimes are Murder/Non-negligent Homicide, Forcible (not Statutory) Rape, Aggravated Assault, and Robbery.
Civic Engagement

Overall, voter registration in Colorado is lower than the national rate, with the exception of the white voter registration rate, which is slightly higher in Colorado than nationally.

In terms of voter turnout, rates in Colorado are higher than national rates, with the exception of Hispanics. Latino/Hispanic voting rates are quite low nationally, but particularly so in Colorado. While white voter turnout in Colorado is 71.7%, Hispanic turnout is only 37.4%.

Environmental Challenges

Located in the Great Plains Region, Colorado and its neighboring states face a number of environmental challenges; air pollution, water shortages and fragmented landscapes are among the most pressing. Like the rest of the world, the Great Plains is facing the reality of climate change. There is a growing demand for water and energy, as rising temperatures are leading to irregular rainfall, snowmelt and changing crop cycles. The landscape is also changing due to extreme weather events like flooding and wildfires.

Climate change threatens agriculture, industry, and, of course, human health. The financial toll will be significant. Pope Francis, in his Encyclical, Laudato Si’, reminds us of the importance of caring for God’s creation: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”

Source: The U.S. Global Change Research Program and The Fourth National Climate Assessment and Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home. Note: 1 – Among the rich Jesuit resources available on the environment is the International Jesuit Ecology Project. Their educational materials can be found at: www.luc.edu/ijep Also, the Carmelites have created a useful high school curriculum and an adult study guide to teach Laudato Si’. Interested individuals, schools and parishes can check it out at www.laudato-si-for-all.com.
PART 2: Reflections

Many national, state and local authorities, businesses, and other organizations make policies that profoundly affect the people of Denver and Colorado whom we strive to serve in the name of Jesus. As we think on these data, we might reflect upon how we as individuals and Jesuit communities and ministries can become more effectively involved in decisions bearing upon the common good.

So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead (James 2:17).

What is it for which you are spending your life?
– Sr. Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

Questions for Reflection

1. In view of the fact that about 49% of the Denver population and 62% of the Colorado population is unaffiliated with any religious denomination (“nones”), and of our significant Jesuit resources, in what new ways are we called to reach out beyond our institutions to bring the reconciling Good News of Jesus Christ?

2. Given the significant educational inequalities that exist in the Denver area (not to mention many other social injustices) is the Jesuit community and our schools doing all that we can to challenge these injustices in word and deed and to promote greater reconciliation?

3. Pope Francis has urged us “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” What exactly does this demand of us in the Denver context?

Never, never be afraid to do what’s right, especially if the well-being of a person...is at stake.
Society’s punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way.
—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.