



The State of Opportunity in America, 2009

Key Findings and Recommendations

March 2009

The State of Opportunity in America, 2009 documents America's progress in protecting opportunity for everyone who lives here. By analyzing government data across a range of indicators, this update of our 2006 and 2007 reports assesses the state of opportunity for our nation as a whole, as well as for different groups within our society.

Opportunity is one of our country's most cherished ideals and one of our most valuable national assets. The promise of opportunity inspires each generation of Americans—regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, or national origin—to strive to reach his or her full potential. Fulfilling this promise not only benefits each of us individually, but also society as a whole. We must therefore ensure that the doors of opportunity are open to all Americans as we work to move forward together.

Our Assessment of Opportunity for 2009

Examination of various indicators finds that access to full and equal opportunity is still very much a mixed reality. The nation has made great strides in increasing opportunity in some areas and for some communities, but many groups of Americans are being left behind in ways that hard work and personal achievement alone cannot address.

The Opportunity Agenda views opportunity through the lens of our most deeply held values: **Security, Equality, Mobility, Voice, Redemption, and Community**. This report measures the degree to which we as a society are living up to these values, and incorporating them into our most critical decisions. Our analysis indicates that different American communities often experience starkly different levels of opportunity.

In most instances, we examined how the nation fared, both overall and for groups, by using the most recent year for which government data were available: 2006 to 2007. We have indicated when the data cover other years. Key findings of this year's report include:

- **Income:** Overall, individual median income increased by only 0.37%, or \$98. However, one group—whites—took a meaningful step forward, increasing their income by 2.22%, or \$633. The gender wage gap still persists. In 2007, women's median income was 78.2% of men's median income, reflecting no significant change from 2006. The race and ethnicity wage gap continues as well. The wage gaps between African Americans and whites and Latinos and whites increased during this time. In 2007, African American individual median income was 75.2% of white median income, and Latino individual median income was 72.6% of white median income.
- **Education:** The high school dropout rate increased by 3.8% for women from 2005 to 2006, and by 2.9% for African Americans, while decreasing by 3.3% for whites. Women still have a lower dropout rate than men, although the gender gap decreased due to a decrease in dropout rates for men and the increase for women.

The Current Economic Crisis

As this report goes to press, the nation is facing the most daunting economic crisis since the Great Depression, including steep increases in unemployment, home foreclosures, and lost assets. Yet, because public sources of governmental data generally reflect a time lag of a year or more, much of the full brunt of today's economic trauma is not reflected in this report. On many indicators of opportunity, the present reality is likely far worse than the most recent available year's statistics would suggest. The 2009 report, which provides snapshots of unemployment, foreclosure, and other numbers emerging this year, paints a vivid picture of opportunity at the dawn of the current economic crisis.

In terms of racial segregation in schools, which was examined over a longer period of time, K-12 public education segregation significantly decreased for white and American Indian students from 1993-1994 to 2005-2006, but significantly increased for African American, Latino, and Asian American students.

- **Health Care:** While the number of people without health insurance decreased overall and for most racial and ethnic groups, Asian Americans experienced an increase in uninsurance. Further, overall out-of-pocket health care costs increased by 4.3%, or \$37, and the overall rate of Americans delaying medical care due to cost increased by 5.4%.
- **Poverty:** More women than men live in poverty, although the gender gap in poverty was fairly stagnant. The race and ethnicity poverty gap also persists—for example, African Americans experienced a poverty rate of 24.5%, compared with 8.2% for whites. The race and ethnicity poverty gap stayed fairly constant for some groups, while American Indians experienced a 19.1% decrease in the gap, and Latinos experienced a 4.4% increase in the gap.

The overall child poverty rate increased, as did the poverty rates for children of color. Poverty rates also increased for naturalized citizens and non-citizens. Additionally, although poverty rates for most groups of workers decreased, African American workers experienced a 5.2% increase in poverty.

- **Incarceration:** The incarceration rate, not including those in local jails, is 506 people per 100,000, and the number of people in federal prison increased by 3.4%. The total number of immigrants incarcerated significantly increased, by 11.2%. The race and ethnicity gap in incarceration increased by 4.4% for African American men, but decreased by 2.7% for African American women and by 6.4% for Latinas.

Key Recommendations Toward Fulfilling Opportunity for All Americans

SECURITY: Assist low-income families and insecure communities in moving into the middle class. Problems of poverty and income insecurity can be reduced by expanding policies that promote living wage standards; job training and skill-building for the 21st Century global economy; access to affordable child care; quality education; and temporary financial assistance programs.

EQUALITY: Increase the staffing and resources that federal, state, and local agencies devote to enforcing human rights and equal opportunity laws. Particularly in light of this year's unprecedented federal economic recovery investments, there is a need to strengthen the capacity of the Coordination and Review Section in the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. It is also important to protect and strengthen human rights by instituting, at the federal level, an Interagency Working Group on Human Rights and develop a U.S. Commission on Civil and Human Rights.

MOBILITY: Promote early childhood and K-12 school programs that improve the quality of education and graduation rates, and invest in comprehensive and integrated education efforts that expand opportunity for all. Investments must be made in K-12 and adult education programs. Promising strategies include universal pre-K; integrated services that address family and community needs; and English Language Learning programs. For adults, we must also focus on financial literacy; educating incarcerated people for reentry; and linguistic and cultural competence for immigrants.

REDEMPTION: Prioritize crime prevention, rehabilitation, and reentry over increased incarceration. Criminal justice policy must combine successful crime prevention strategies with rehabilitation and productive reentry. Such strategies include expanding availability of substance abuse treatment; basing criminal sentencing on individualized culpability, control, and circumstances, rather than on mandatory minimum sentencing policies; and ending the sentence of life without parole for youth.

VOICE: Ensure and expand political participation among diverse groups of Americans. Central to this goal is equal access to the vote, with policies that address complications caused by geographic and language barriers; faulty voting equipment and infrastructure; and state laws disenfranchising people with felony convictions.

COMMUNITY: Evaluate public expenditures through the lens of an Opportunity Impact Statement. All levels of government can and should use a new policy tool—an Opportunity Impact Statement—as a requirement for publicly funded or authorized projects, especially those that are tied to economic recovery.

The full report, with all indicators, is available at www.opportunityagenda.org/stateofopportunity.