



The State of Opportunity in America 2010

Opportunity is one of our country's core values 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.

The Opportunity Agenda assesses 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 critical decisions. Our analysis indicates that different American communities continue to experience drastically different levels of opportunity.

An Inequitable Recovery to Date

More than a year and a half after the economic crisis began, employment indicators signal that, without intervention, the country may have a recovery that reinforces prior inequity.

Although recent unemployment numbers indicate a slowing of job losses, there is still a marked disparity in the rate for whites (8.8%), as compared to the rate for African Americans (16.5%) and Hispanics (12.6%). Furthermore, 44.1% of the unemployed are considered long-term unemployed, meaning they have been seeking work for 27 weeks or more.

In addition to the much-watched unemployment rate, underemployment data – which tracks unemployed workers actively seeking work, involuntary part-time workers, and marginally attached workers – offers a telling snapshot of the difficulties facing American workers. At the end of 2009, the underemployment rate was at 14.5 % for whites and nearly doubled to 25% for African Americans and Hispanics, making it clear that recovery is not yet equally shared.

April 2010 Opportunity Indicator Update

This update to *the State of Opportunity 2009* documents America's progress in promoting opportunity for everyone who lives here by analyzing recently-released government data across a range of indicators – thereby assessing the state of opportunity for our nation as a whole, as well as for different groups within our society.

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

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: 2007 to 2008. We have indicated when the data cover other years.

Key findings of this year's report include:

- **Poverty:** Poverty has increased dramatically, with 2.6 million people newly living in poverty, of whom 700,000 are children. The race and ethnicity poverty gap also persists—for example, African Americans experienced a poverty rate of 24.7% and Latinos experienced a poverty rate of 23.2%, nearly triple the 8.6% poverty rate for whites.
- **Bankruptcy:** The number of bankruptcies increased by a remarkable 28.9%, with 968,000 in the first two quarters of 2008, as opposed to 751,000 in the first two quarters of 2007.

- **Food Security:** Many families and individuals are increasingly experiencing food insecurity – defined as living in hunger or the fear of starvation. Food security for households decreased by 3.9%, with 3.7 million fewer households having food security. Food security for individuals decreased by 4.8%, with 10.4 million fewer households having food security. And, food security decreased for children by 6.7%, with 3.7 million fewer children having food security.
- **Wage Gap:** The wage gap between men and women has remained relatively constant, with women’s wages at 76.8% of men’s. For Asian American women, the gap decreased by 3.5%, with Asian American women’s median wage now at 92.5% of the median wage for men of all races. For African American women, the gap increased by 1.4%, with African American women’s median wage 67.4% of the median wage for men of all races. And, for Latinas, the gap increased by 2.7%, with Latinas now earning 57.4% of the median wage for men of all races.
- **College Affordability:** The cost of college, at both public and private institutions, has increased dramatically in the past 10 years. At public colleges and universities, the cost of tuition, fees, and room and board increased 36.9%, from \$10,471 to \$14,333, between 1998-1999 and 2008-2009. At private colleges and universities, there was a 23.8% increase, from \$27,580 to \$34,132, during the same time period.
- **Voting Rates:** The 2008 elections marked a major increase in voting rates for people of color, as compared to the most recent Presidential election, in 2004. While the overall voting rate remained relatively flat, at 58.2%, the African American voting rate increased by 8%, from 56.3% to 60.8%, the Asian American voting rate increased by 7.7%, from 29.8% to 32.1%, and the Latino voting rate increased by 12.9%, from 28% to 31.6%. In comparison, 18-24 year olds, a closely-watched demographic, increased 5.7%, to 44.3%.

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.

This document, with all opportunity indicators, is available at www.opportunityagenda.org.