



Talking About *The State of Opportunity in America*

This memo offers communications and advocacy guidance for using the 2009 *State of Opportunity in America* report, which examines various dimensions of opportunity, including health care, wealth and income, education, and incarceration. While expanding opportunity in America remains a goal of policymakers and advocates alike, this report finds that access to full and equal opportunity is still very much a mixed reality. Our recommendations to address this reality offer concrete ideas for moving us forward together.

Talking About Opportunity

We believe that speaking about social issues in terms of opportunity is a good strategic choice. Opportunity—the idea that everyone deserves a fair chance to live up to his or her full potential—is an ideal that most Americans instinctively support. Framing policy and research in terms of opportunity can help to persuade new audiences and inspire action—tapping into hopeful, forward-looking values, while challenging Americans to support transformative policies. While some feel opportunity is there for the taking, most realize that our collective decisions and the resulting policies shape access to opportunity in profound ways. Measuring policies by their impact on opportunity can help connect complex policy ideas to core national values.

Key Talking Points

- 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 report paints a vivid picture of opportunity at the dawn of the current economic crisis. But even before the downturn, different American communities experienced starkly different levels of opportunity. There is real reason to believe that the current crisis is affecting some communities far more severely than others. This is clear in the most recent unemployment numbers included in the most recent *State of Opportunity in America* report.
- It's in our nation's interest for everyone to have economic security and the opportunity to move forward. We are all in it together in this economy and allowing barriers to opportunity to exist for any community hurts us all. Recovering from this financial crisis demands new rules for a 21st Century global economy that connect all communities to economic recovery.

General Communications Guidelines

Lead with values. The ideal of opportunity represents specific positive values that we must reinvigorate. Beginning communications with values like these inspires audiences more effectively than do dry statistics or stories of despair. The *State of Opportunity in America* measures opportunity through the lens of six core American values:



- **Equality:** The benefits and burdens of society should not depend on what we look like or where we come from.
- **Security:** We should all have the tools to meet our own basic needs and those of our families.
- **Mobility:** Where we start out in life should not determine where we end up.
- **Voice:** We should all have a say in the decisions that affect us.
- **Redemption:** People grow and change over time and deserve a chance to start over after missteps or misfortune.
- **Community:** We are all in it together in our society and share responsibilities for each other, and seek solutions that serve the common good.

Messages should also emphasize that fulfilling these values is essential to our **Human Rights**.

Emphasize opportunity for all. This report examines the opportunity of Americans both across and within demographic groups, stressing the importance of expanding opportunity for *all*. Communicating our concerns and goals in terms of our shared destiny, and the forces—good and bad—that connect us, opens up new conversations and moves us toward hope and away from harmful framing of social justice issues in terms of individualism, competition, and blame.

Link issues. In our current economic climate, audiences are hearing a mantra about the necessity of making tough choices. But the reality is that if we do not consider all of the issues that comprise American opportunity, it will never be fully realized. This report is cross cutting, showing, for example, how income-related conditions interrelate with health and education, and how all of these compare by race and gender, as data were available. The result is a big-picture take on how these issues combine to aid or hinder the realization of opportunity—showing, among other things, that millions of Americans are facing multiple barriers to opportunity.

Balance the threat and the promise. While this report finds that opportunity is still at risk in 2009, messages should use positive themes of opportunity to remind audiences of our nation's ability to overcome challenges. Emphasizing solutions taps into Americans' pride and counters people's inclination to see a parade of social and economic ills as impossible to solve. Advocates can use this report to cite evidence demonstrating that opportunity is at risk for all Americans, while arguing that we have it in our power to expand opportunity for all through leadership and specific policies that embody our values. We recommend, for example, using a message structure of value, problem, solution, action.

Additional Talking Point Suggestions

- Opportunity, the idea that everyone should have a fair chance to live up to his or her full potential, is a cherished ideal and one of our nation's most valuable national assets. The promise of opportunity consistently inspires us—motivating innovation and hard work, bringing newcomers to our shores, and giving hope to future generations. But for far too many Americans, the promise still rings hollow.



- Research shows that assets and incomes vary broadly between groups, reflecting significant gaps in opportunity across race and gender. We cannot live up to our promise of equality as long as these gaps go unaddressed.
- One way to see if we're making progress in protecting and expanding opportunity is to look at our education system, and ours is not living up to its promise for many students. For instance, elementary and high schools are now more segregated for African American, Latino, and Asian American students than they were twelve years ago. But research shows that integrated schools benefit all of our kids, deepening critical thinking skills, strengthening problem-solving ability, and increasing students' likelihood of being comfortable and effective in different job situations.
- More and more children are living in poverty in this country, which is an insult to our core values. Denying children the opportunities afforded by an economically stable upbringing poses great risks to our nation's future. That some groups of children are more likely to live in poverty than others hurts us still more. Standing by while these threats to equality, security, and mobility persist is not an acceptable option.

Using the Data

The data in this report are primarily from federal governmental sources, and the report's presentation is designed to be worked directly into fact sheets, talking points, reports, and other tools. A few notes:

- As described above, this report measures opportunity through the lens of six core American values: Security, Equality, Mobility, Redemption, Voice, and Community. While each of the values cuts across multiple issue areas, some readers will find that those indicators most relevant to them are concentrated in one or two value areas. For example, indicators relating to criminal justice are located primarily in the Redemption section, but the Equality section also highlights ongoing disparities in the incarceration of populations of color.
- In most instances, the report examined how the nation fared, both overall and for groups, by using the most recent year for which government data were available, often from 2006 to 2007. However, for each indicator, the report clearly identifies the year and source of the data.
- The online version of the report will be updated throughout the year as new numbers come in, and indicators will be added as needed.
- The data and policy recommendations can be used to support and reinforce local information and action. For example, the data regarding wealth and income could provide national context to a local living wage campaign. Similarly, the policy recommendations could be a useful tool for state legislators looking to expand opportunity.

The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. The Opportunity Agenda is a project of the Tides Center. Visit us at www.opportunityagenda.org.