

## Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

Opportunity is one of America's most cherished and powerful ideals. It has drawn millions to our shores in search of a better life, and it sustains the dreams of those born here. It is articulated in the seminal ideas and documents of the nation's founding, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. It is reinforced in the human rights laws that the United States helped to craft a half-century ago and has sought to champion around the world. Americans have fought to protect opportunity during periods of great conflict and challenge such as World War II and during the civil and human rights struggles that marked the latter half of the twentieth century.

Today, however, after more than a half-century of progress, opportunity and human rights in the United States are at a crossroads. The nation has made great strides in erecting legal protections against official segregation and overt exclusion of marginalized groups. But subtle discrimination and the continuing effects of past discrimination still greatly diminish the life chances of millions of Americans. People of color remain separate and unequal in many aspects of life, from education, to housing, to health care and criminal justice. Although we are, more than ever, a nation of immigrants, America is increasingly closing its doors to newcomers and allowing exploitation of people who have come here for a better life. Despite real progress, women are still shut out of many jobs, services, and societal roles. Working and poor families of all races are increasingly unable to support themselves and move forward, even when they hold two or three different jobs. And unprecedented numbers of Americans are warehoused within a criminal justice system that has largely abandoned the human values of redemption and rehabilitation, even for children. These are just some of the signs that the promise of the American Dream--the idea that anyone in this country can achieve her or his full life potential--has withered for millions of people.

*This report assesses the nation's progress toward protecting and expanding opportunity for all Americans.* If the promise of opportunity is a core national commitment, it is essential to measure our success in fulfilling that commitment, just as we measure our economic health and our military preparedness. By gauging how the nation fares in providing opportunity, we can build on our successes and address those areas where we are falling short.

Drawing on a broad range of research, we find that opportunity is at risk for all Americans. For example, as a growing number of businesses reduce or eliminate health care benefits, more and more U.S. workers face serious health and financial risks. And high rates of uninsurance have broad effects on health care costs and access, even for the insured. Moreover, some groups of Americans are facing multiple barriers to opportunity. For example, people who live in high-poverty, predominantly minority communities are more likely to face poorly funded schools, inadequate public transportation to jobs, environmental hazards, high crime rates, and a lack of

representation on the public airwaves and in government. These obstacles build on one another and compound over time, combining to erode opportunity.

Through bold leadership and innovative policies, the nation's elected leaders can ensure the promise of opportunity in America. This report encourages our policymakers to:

- Regularly assess the impact of public policies on opportunity;
- Modernize safety net programs that help people meet their basic needs, starting with equitable and affordable health care for all Americans;
- Build Americans' skills to adapt to a global economy, evolving technology, and an increasingly diverse population;
- Renew a commitment to human rights in the United States;
- Prioritize crime prevention and rehabilitation over increased incarceration; and
- Protect voting rights and promote political participation.

### **The Purpose and Methodology of This Report**

This report assesses the nation's progress toward protecting and expanding opportunity for all Americans. We define opportunity as follows:

*Opportunity means that all individuals have a fair chance to achieve their full human potential. Having a fair chance requires equal treatment, economic security and mobility, a voice in decisions that affect us, a chance to start over after misfortune or missteps, and a shared responsibility for each other as neighbors and fellow Americans.*

In deriving this definition and the indicators that measure it, we considered the rich body of social science research about different aspects of opportunity. Relevant studies come from a variety of academic disciplines including economics, sociology, public health, political science, education, psychology, and law. In this effort and throughout the development of this report, we consulted with a distinguished group of experts on the theoretical and practical dynamics that make up opportunity, the types of access and social assets that serve as stepping stones to opportunity, and the practical ways of measuring opportunity's components.

From that body of research and consultation we worked with our advisors to identify, extract, and report reliable data--overwhelmingly from U.S. Census and other federal governmental sources--that measure our nation's progress in providing opportunity for all. Finally, we submitted our methodology to another distinguished group of scholars that included members of our initial advisory groups and outside experts. These individuals are listed in the *Preface and Acknowledgments* section at the beginning of this document.

No body of data can fully capture an idea as rich and complex as opportunity in America, and this report is no exception. Measuring and reporting every aspect of opportunity

experienced by the diverse individuals and communities that make up the U.S. population would have been impossible. In addition, we encountered significant limitations in the data related to opportunity that government and other institutions collect. For example, data are often unavailable or are inadequate for many racial and ethnic minority groups other than African Americans and Hispanics. Nonetheless, we believe that *The State of Opportunity* represents a comprehensive effort to measure our society's progress toward achieving our national ideal--an opportunity society.

We measure progress based on six interrelated dimensions and principles of opportunity:

**Mobility.** Everyone who works hard should be able to advance and participate fully in the nation's economic, political, and cultural life. Any poor child in America should be able to fulfill her or his full potential; economic status at birth should not pre-determine ultimate achievements or assets.

**Equality.** Access to the benefits, responsibilities, and burdens of our society should exist without discrimination or inequality based on race, gender, nationality, socioeconomic status, or other aspects of what we look like or where we come from. Nor should favoritism, nepotism, or corruption work to shut out disfavored groups or perpetuate a privileged class.

**Voice.** We embrace democracy as a system that depends on the ability of all of us to participate in the public dialogue. The voting booth, the town square, the street corner, and the op-ed page remain important, and have been joined by broadcast and electronic media. This aspect of the American ideal provides not only freedom from censorship, but key opportunities to participate in our society's political, cultural, and intellectual life.

**Redemption.** Human beings are not fixed in their abilities or motivations; they evolve and develop based on available options, incentives, and support. Current ability is not the same as future potential. People who falter in their efforts deserve a chance to get back on their feet; those who break societal rules warrant not just punishment, but also the opportunity for rehabilitation, redemption, and a second chance.

**Community.** We are part of a common national enterprise, linked in our successes and challenges, and responsible to each other as well as to ourselves. We value diversity as a strength, and strive to evolve with our changing population.

**Security.** Regardless of skills or abilities, no one should be denied access to a basic level of education, health, and economic well-being. Without this basic protection from exploitation, it is impossible to access the other rights and responsibilities that society has to offer.

### **How Can the Nation Expand Opportunity for All?**

This report holds important implications for policymakers, civic leaders, and all Americans concerned about the state of opportunity in the United States. Its findings

include some major gains that should be a source of national pride, and that we must work together as a society to maintain. In particular, increased rates of college enrollment for some Americans, gains in the number of women and people of color elected to political office, and freedom from violent crime are real, if incomplete, success stories.

The findings also show, however, that our progress has stalled in many areas, and that for some of the most important measures, opportunity is actively shrinking for millions of Americans. Findings such as the huge and growing number of uninsured Americans, the unprecedented number of Americans behind bars, a growing wealth gap, and the rising costs of college, housing, and other opportunity stepping stones for working families raise grave concerns.

The findings also demonstrate that some groups of Americans--including Americans of color, low-income Americans and, frequently, women and immigrants--are facing multiple barriers to opportunity that often combine to deny the promise of the American Dream. These groups must grapple with disparate obstacles like wage inequality, reduced access to credit and homeownership, unequal health care access and treatment, inadequate political and media representation, and the disproportionate impact of law enforcement practices. Research evidence shows that Americans' attitudes toward people of other groups have improved considerably in past decades. But discrimination, stereotypes, and implicit biases still play a powerful role in determining the opportunity and life outcomes of millions of Americans.

Without renewed national commitment and concrete policy changes to reverse these negative trends, the promise of opportunity for all is at great risk for current and future generations. Fulfilling the promise of opportunity for all will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century. It will require bold leadership from our government, civic, and business leaders; creative and effective solutions; and the sustained political will of the American people. Fortunately, a significant body of pragmatic policies has proved effective in expanding opportunity in concrete and measurable ways. The *State of Opportunity* report recommends six types of policy approaches, described below.

## **1. Planning for Opportunity**

Experience shows that it is important to consider all aspects of opportunity when fashioning new policies and programs that will affect Americans' life chances. With these principles in mind, we recommend that:

- Governments use a new policy tool--an Opportunity Impact Statement--as a requirement for publicly funded or authorized projects like school, hospital, or highway construction, or the expansion of the telecommunications infrastructure. The statements would explain, based on available data, how a given effort would expand or contract opportunity in terms of equitable treatment, economic security

- and mobility, and shared responsibility, and they would require public input and participation.
- Land-use, zoning, and transportation policies actively promote opportunity by encouraging the development of mixed-income communities; reversing the isolation of highly segregated racial, ethnic, and high-poverty communities; supporting public transportation that helps people commute from areas of high unemployment to areas of high job growth; and planning regionally to address inequality among urban, suburban, and rural communities.
  - Government make expanding opportunity a condition of its partnerships with private industry, for example, by requiring public contractors to pay a living wage tied to families' actual cost of living, insisting on employment practices that promote diversity and inclusion, and ensuring that new technologies using the public electromagnetic spectrum include public interest obligations and extend service to all communities.

## **2. Mending the Safety Net**

Well-crafted programs that enable people to meet the basic needs of their families have lifted millions of Americans out of poverty and sustained millions more in times of crisis or transition. Despite the popularity and proven success of Social Security, the federal and state Child Health Insurance Program, and food assistance for low-income families, these programs are increasingly underfunded and reach fewer and fewer Americans in need. We recommend modernizing the traditional safety net by focusing on moving Americans from poverty and crisis to economic security and mobility. These recommendations include:

- Rapidly moving toward a system of high quality, equitable, and comprehensive health care that covers all Americans' basic health needs;
- Expanding state and federal food assistance programs such as food stamps and school lunches to serve all children and adults in need, and providing incentives for grocery stores to stock affordable, nutritious foods in low-income urban and rural communities;
- Scaling up successful pilot programs that help lower income families to save, build assets, and acquire financial skills.

## **3. Updating Skills in a Changing America**

Americans are in the midst of monumental changes fueled by a global economy, rapidly evolving technology, and an increasingly diverse population. The new American reality demands new skills and knowledge. We must ensure that all Americans have access to the education, training, and information needed to embrace the opportunities of the new century. Our recommendations include:

- Expanding job training programs focused on quality jobs in the new economy and tailored to the differing skills and needs of different workers;

- Reducing financial barriers to college by increasing the share of need-based grants over student loans and improving private sector participation through scholarship aid. For example, federal Pell Grant awards should be doubled and state, federal, and private financial aid better integrated, in order to create a complementary system that allocates resources more efficiently.
- Creating effective and inclusive immigrant integration policies that educate new Americans about their rights and responsibilities in the workplace, political participation, and the naturalization process, while better equipping our institutions and communities to incorporate diverse new members. An important element of these policies is assisting new Americans in learning English and providing multilingual access to necessities like health care and basic rights like voting.

#### **4. Renewing America's Commitment to Human Rights**

Some of the greatest strides in advancing American opportunity emerged from the twentieth century movements for racial equality, women's rights, and workers' rights. The findings of this report show that this work is not yet complete and that what is needed is both vigorous enforcement of existing anti-discrimination protections and a new generation of human rights laws that address evolving forms of bias and exclusion. Our recommendations include:

- Increasing the staffing and resources that federal, state, and local agencies devote to enforcing anti-discrimination laws in voting, employment, housing, education, lending, criminal justice and other spheres. This includes using data more effectively to better detect potential bias, for instance, by comparing companies' workforce diversity with the composition of an area's qualified workforce.
- Assisting employers and other institutions committed to providing a fair and diverse environment, for example, by promoting model performance evaluation practices, greater cultural fluency, and other tools to counter bias and exclusion.
- Crafting new human rights laws that complement existing civil rights protections by addressing subconscious and institutional biases more effectively, protecting economic and social rights like the right to education, and correcting exclusion based on socioeconomic status and other characteristics not fully covered by current laws.

#### **5. Giving Priority to Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Reentry**

The last two decades have seen significant progress in reducing violent crime, but also a leap in the number of nonviolent and drug-addicted women and men in jails and prisons, large racial disparities among the incarcerated, and new barriers to the reentry of people with criminal records into productive society. We recommend a set of policies that build on successful crime prevention strategies while fostering rehabilitation and productive reentry, including:

- Expanding community policing--a crime prevention strategy that emphasizes community input, collaboration, and tailored responses to crime and disorder. These approaches have a demonstrated track record of improving police-community relations and community satisfaction.
- Increasing the availability of substance abuse treatment, including using it as an alternative to incarceration. Emerging research suggests that “drug courts”--specialized judicial proceedings that provide substance abuse treatment, testing, supervision, and a range of other coordinated services for people addicted to drugs who might otherwise face incarceration--are effective in reducing recidivism, increasing retention of addicted people in treatment, and saving taxpayer money. Where possible, these programs should allow successful participants to avoid a criminal record that will hamper their future progress.
- Basing criminal sentencing on individualized culpability, control, and circumstances. Mandatory minimum sentencing policies have exacerbated racial and ethnic inequality in incarceration rates, significantly increased the number of women behind bars, and led to many unjust sentences, while doing little to deter crime. Replacing these policies with sentencing based on the circumstances of each case will reduce racial inequality and adverse impacts on women while better promoting public safety and the interests of justice.
- Reviewing criminal justice practices to identify and address the junctures at which stereotypes and discrimination currently influence the outcome.
- Restoring voting rights and removing other barriers to the reentry into society of people who have been incarcerated.

## **6. Strengthening Our Democracy Through Stepped Up Leadership**

National leadership is necessary to protect democratic participation and to promote diverse involvement in the American political process. Voting and political participation are among our most cherished federal rights; the federal government has the greatest authority and responsibility to protect them. Our recommendations include:

- Establishing minimum federal standards for voting equipment and procedures, including straightforward voter registration requirements, nationwide voting hours, and federal guidelines to verify voter identity. Meeting these standards will require federal support to help local authorities improve training, machinery, and polling stations.
- Vigorously enforcing the Voting Rights Act and fully implementing the Help America Vote Act, while providing greater assistance to new Americans and others in obtaining and exercising the right to vote.

Finally, we urge government leaders to take up the challenge, begun by this report, of measuring our progress in providing opportunity to all Americans. This includes gathering the demographic data and other information necessary to determine how different groups of Americans are faring.

