

The Opportunity Survey

Understanding the Roots of
Attitudes on Inequality



The **Opportunity** Agenda

Moving Hearts, Minds, and Policy for Lasting Change

Executive Summary

Nine in 10 Americans see discrimination against one or more groups in U.S. society as a serious problem, while far fewer say government programs to deal with it are successful. Potential support for greater efforts thus exists—but only within a matrix of values, experiences, and priorities that forms the basis of perceptions of inequality and willingness to address it.

The Opportunity Survey¹ pulls apart those strands, measuring not only public attitudes about inequality and related policies but also the basic orientations that influence those views. Beyond customary political and ideological preferences, these include more fundamental values and beliefs that inform views of society and social policy.

Current Attitudes

The national survey, sponsored by The Opportunity Agenda, finds that the public sees discrimination most keenly as it affects low-income adults, with 75 percent calling unequal treatment of the poor a very or somewhat serious problem in U.S. society. Next is discrimination against formerly incarcerated people, undocumented immigrants, black men, Native Americans, black women, and gays or lesbians, with 55 to 60 percent calling each of these a serious problem.

As noted, a total of nine in 10 see unfair treatment of one or more of these groups as a serious problem, a nearly unanimous judgment. At the same time, just 41 percent think that government programs designed to prevent discrimination are effective, with a mere 4 percent saying they're working "very" well.

Further, six in 10 Americans say they personally have experienced at least one of the various types of unfair treatment tested in this survey—that is, on the basis of their financial situation, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, language ability, or religion. This experience is a strong predictor of sensitivity to the issue.

Views on social policies, for their part, share a starting point of extensive public dissatisfaction with the status quo. Anywhere from 69 to 81 percent of Americans see a need for

1. This report is based on a national survey of 2,055 adults produced for The Opportunity Agenda by Langer Research Associates of New York, N.Y., an independent, nonpartisan research company specializing in survey design, management, and analysis. Field work was conducted via the randomly recruited, nationally representative GfK KnowledgePanel®.

either major improvements or a complete redesign of the U.S. criminal justice system, economic system, public education system, and/or the political system overall.

But there are differences—and sometimes conflicted attitudes—on what reform might look like. By 54 to 46 percent, for example, Americans divide on whether the criminal justice system would do better by focusing on stricter punishment for people convicted of crimes or on greater efforts to rehabilitate them. Yet, post-punishment, two-thirds support increased spending on job training and placement programs for people who have served a prison sentence, and majorities, 55 and 56 percent, respectively, support tax incentives for employers to hire formerly incarcerated people and laws restricting discrimination in hiring against such individuals.

Another criminal justice issue has a highly lopsided result: An overwhelming 86 percent say police officers should not be permitted to stop and search people solely because of their race or ethnicity, with most favoring system-wide training programs, rather than individual officer-level retraining, to ensure that this does not occur.

In terms of housing discrimination, two groups, people who formerly have been imprisoned and undocumented immigrants, are most apt to be perceived as victimized. However, just three in 10 adults see housing discrimination laws as “too weak,” suggesting that the challenge in terms of housing is seen as one of enforcement rather than legislation.

There is substantial support, at the same time, for legislation to address the status of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Fifty-six percent of Americans support a “path to citizenship” for these individuals—and this grows sharply, to 83 percent, if they first pay a fine, pay back taxes, learn English, and pass background checks.

The survey finds Americans most disposed to take action to assist two groups in particular—women and the poor—with more than six in 10 saying they’d be willing to work to improve opportunities for these groups (or already do so). About half as many, 31 and 32 percent, respectively, express willingness to help undocumented immigrants or formerly incarcerated individuals. Willingness to help other groups—Native Americans, black women and black men, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and Asian Americans—falls in between these extremes.

In terms of taking action on the basis of issues, rather than groups, reducing poverty receives the most interest, followed by encouraging equal opportunity for all, with two-thirds or more willing to act (or already doing so). Fewer than half, in contrast, are motivated to help seek fair treatment of minorities in the criminal justice system, secure the U.S. border with Mexico, or provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

Willingness to engage in specific actions to support an issue or group shows broader openness toward behaviors that require less commitment. Two-thirds are willing to talk to others they know about their views (including 8 percent who already do so), and 62 percent say they would sign a petition (or have done so). Far fewer are willing to engage in more public, committing behaviors to further a cause, such as writing something to motivate others, participating in a creative project, or taking part in a protest or demonstration.

Core Values and Key Predictors

The public differs on the causes of inequality. Americans are most apt to feel that unfair treatment of women and Native Americans reflects conditions in society, rather than these groups' own behavior. They're least apt to feel that way about formerly incarcerated people, with other groups between these poles.

The Opportunity Survey finds that basic values and perceptions of society play into these views and in many cases are triggers for concern about discrimination, issue support, and willingness to act. Among them:

- Eighty-five percent of Americans think society works better when all have an equal chance at success, with 57 percent feeling that way strongly. Sixty-three percent, moreover, see inequality of opportunity in general as unacceptable.
- Just 37 percent say that society currently offers equal opportunities to most or all groups, while a similar number, four in 10, say just some or only a few groups have an equal chance to succeed. (The rest, 25%, take the middle position, saying “a good number” have equal opportunities.)
- Seven in 10 are open to new ways of doing things, vs. three in 10 who prefer to stick to traditional approaches—a result that suggests significant potential room for acceptance of innovation when it comes to addressing social problems, if tailored to other preferences.
- Just a quarter of adults believe they personally have substantial ability to effect change on social issues they care about; 37 percent feel they have “some” such ability, while four in 10 say they have only limited ability to bring about change. This sense of efficacy predicts willingness to take action on behalf of groups or issues.

With these as starting points, the survey adds insight into where America stands on opportunity issues—and why. Section I of this report documents the current attitudes described

above. Section II looks at core values, perceptions of society, and group identities. Drawn from tenets of social psychology (see Appendix A, available at www.opportunityagenda.org), this analysis adds the overlay of personal experiences and the relationship of these factors to views on discrimination. The first half of Section III then examines common predictors of support for policies to address social issues and willingness to take action on them.

These sections include results of statistical modeling (detailed in Appendix D, available at www.opportunityagenda.org) produced to tease out the strongest independent predictors of concern about discrimination. Results underscore the role of basic values, social orientations, and personal experience in the attitudes of interest.

In one example, seeing unequal treatment of various groups as a serious problem is strongly predicted by political ideology but also by even more basic views. Those additional predictors include:

- Attitudes on the acceptability of unequal treatment
- Whether prosperity is seen chiefly as linked among people or the result of individual effort
- Personal experience of unfair treatment because of group membership
- Traditionalism
- Whether group behavior or social conditions are perceived as more responsible for inequality
- The extent to which individuals strongly identify with the groups to which they belong

Prioritizing values such as loyalty, authority, or honor, meanwhile, relates to diminished concern about unequal treatment.

Many of these same variables also predict perceptions of housing discrimination and support for policies to alleviate poverty, to reform the criminal justice system, and to provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Understanding the predictors of these attitudes provides useful insights into policy formation and public motivation alike.

Moving from attitudes to action, the statistical modeling results also predict willingness to become personally involved on behalf of various groups. Some of the same predictors emerge, as do others. Predictors of willingness to take action on behalf of groups, or on specific issues, include:

- Frequency of contact with members of other groups
- Perceived seriousness of unequal treatment
- Personal and group efficacy
- Personal experience of unfair treatment as a group member

Recognizing these triggers to citizen involvement adds another layer of actionable information to the Opportunity Survey's findings.

The results also show that people who see discrimination against one group as a serious problem are more likely to say the same about unequal treatment of other groups—demonstrating that this view is not a simple matter of self-interest or single-group sensitivity, but rather an expression of a broader core belief.

Cluster Analysis

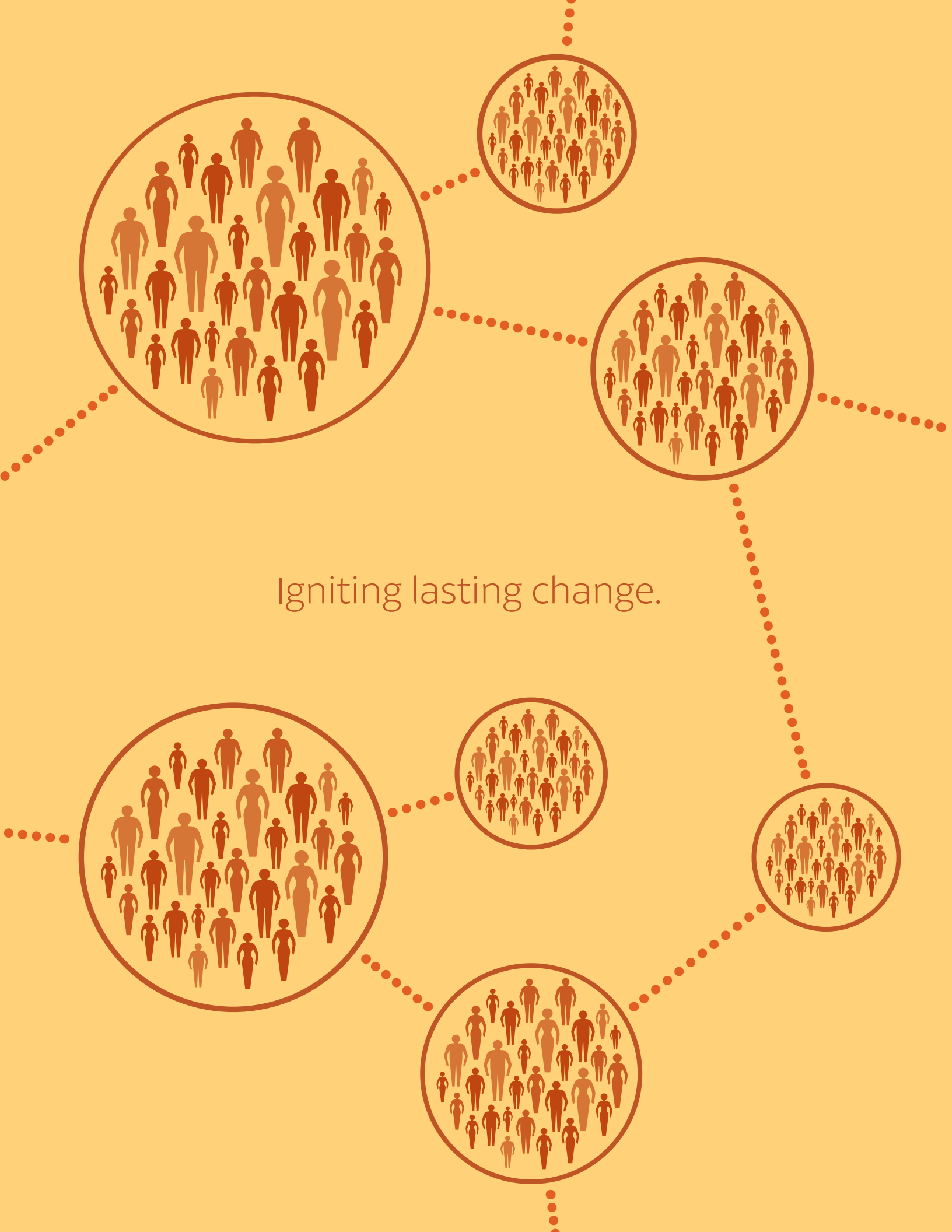
As a next step in understanding motivations to act on social issues, the Opportunity Survey identifies segments of the U.S. population on the basis of their views on discrimination, their personal experiences with it, and their willingness to take steps to address inequality. Six typologies emerge, with differing demographic characteristics, policy views, and core values, as follows:

- **Core catalysts**, 19 percent of the adult population of the United States, are those most committed to advancing equal opportunity. Including disproportionate numbers of racial and ethnic minorities and political liberals and slightly more women than average—especially unmarried women—members of this group are the most likely to have experienced unfair treatment personally, to think it's a serious problem, and to be willing to act to address it. They have strong in-group identities, eschew tradition, reject notions of inherent superiority, and are more apt than others to see people's prosperity as linked rather than as individual outcomes. They're also more confident they can bring about change, a precursor to taking action.

- **Potential advocates**, 18 percent of adults, are less apt than core catalysts to have experienced unequal treatment but are highly attuned to it nonetheless. Including many white liberals, members of this group broadly support an active social policy agenda, rank “equal treatment” prominently as a value, and are more likely than average to attribute inequality to social conditions rather than to group behaviors. Yet they’re among the least apt to have strong in-group identities of their own and much less inclined than core catalysts to believe they personally, or groups generally, can bring about change.
- **Ambivalents**, 22 percent of the population, are conflicted. Many perceive inequality of opportunity, support policies intended to address it, and think it’s better when everyone has an equal chance. But they also hold some core values—including traditionalism, individualism, and a stress on acting honorably—that militate against activism. They’re the oldest of the six groups on average, with numerically the highest share of women.
- **The disengaged**, 14 percent overall, include more men, especially more unmarried men, than any other group. They’re generally comfortable with the status quo and uninvolved politically, with limited personal experience of discrimination and the least personal efficacy of any group. Eight in 10 think individuals are responsible for their own success, six in 10 say some groups are more intelligent than others, and they’re far below average in their willingness to take action to help the disadvantaged.
- **Skeptics**, 17 percent of adults, are not inclined to support policy initiatives on opportunity issues, although not adamantly opposed. They’re below average in their perceptions of the extent and seriousness of inequality among groups, slightly more apt than average to think it’s caused by group behaviors rather than by social conditions, and less likely than average to have personally experienced unfair treatment. They lean toward a conservative orientation and away from the Democratic Party.
- **Resistants**, the final 10 percent, express ideological opposition to social policies intended to address inequality. Overwhelmingly conservative politically and more apt than others to be Republican, they include more married men and fewer unmarried women than any other group. Half see inequality of opportunity as at least somewhat acceptable; regardless, six in 10 think equality is generally available, a view far less prevalent among others. Individualism, meritocracy, honor, and tradition are core values.

These typologies are evaluated in greater detail in Section III of this report. Section IV goes on to examine some groups of additional interest, describing values and attitudes among very low-income adults, black men, and three groups that have received attention in terms of their political impact—nonwhites overall, unmarried women, and millennials (adults younger than age 30). Appendices include a review of the relevant social psychology literature, the survey's topline results, methodology, details of statistical modeling, and references.

Understanding the roots of public opinion on inequality and social issues is key to working with it. Whether the aim is policy formation, communication, or motivation, strategies are best targeted when they take into account underlying predispositions and independent predictors of attitudes and propensity to act. The Opportunity Survey points clearly in those directions.



Igniting lasting change.