



# Boosting Mobility and Advancing Equity through Systems Change

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**Substantially boosting mobility from poverty and advancing racial equity requires reforms to the structures and systems that have long undermined the efforts of people with low incomes and people of color to seize opportunities for greater prosperity, dignity, and well-being. Achieving systems change requires both a holistic approach to reform and a long-term commitment to measuring and reporting outcomes at all levels of government and across sectors. This poses significant challenges for data collection, analysis, and interpretation that can be daunting for local communities. This brief aims to arm local leaders with information they can use to articulate the importance of systems change; advocate for fundamental reforms to public policies, institutional norms and practices, and prevailing narratives; and measure progress over time.**

## Structural Barriers Block Equitable Upward Mobility

For most people experiencing poverty in the US today, opportunities to achieve greater economic success, power and autonomy, and dignity are blocked by long-standing structural barriers, not by a failure of individual effort. Poverty, precarity, and inequality are not the inevitable consequence of market economies nor are they substantially the result of individual deficits in or behaviors by the people experiencing these conditions. Instead, these outcomes result largely from public policies and institutional practices, including the following:

- The laws and regulations that define markets and govern the behavior of private firms. For example, people working full-time at the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour do

not earn enough to lift a family of four out of poverty.<sup>1</sup> Requiring private employers to pay a higher minimum wage would lift millions out of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

- The public policies and programs meant to help people navigate current systems and achieve economic mobility. For example, 28 states and the District of Columbia provide an earned income tax credit, or EITC, that supplements the federal EITC. These state EITCs encourage work and reduce hardship for families with children.<sup>3</sup> But the patchwork of state EITC policies means some families benefit while others do not, depending on where they live.

People experiencing poverty face a web of barriers that often impede or undermine their best efforts. For example,

- the neighborhoods where they can afford to live often lack essential services like grocery stores, child care, and health providers, and suffer from high levels of violent crime (Koltoi et al. 2021);<sup>4</sup>
- poor-performing public schools in these neighborhoods deprive students of the knowledge, skills, and credentials they need to thrive in today's economy (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003);
- the jobs for which they are qualified offer low wages, unpredictable hours, and irregular schedules, with no paid time off (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003); and
- because day-to-day expenses absorb all their wages, they struggle to accumulate the savings necessary to pay for emergency expenses, afford quality housing, start a business, or pay for college.

Many of these barriers have resulted from and are perpetuated by racist beliefs, norms, policies, and practices and have produced deep and persistent inequities. For example,

- the practice of redlining—denying mortgage loans to certain neighborhoods or areas deemed high risk, based on the race, ethnicity, and immigration status of the people living there—created stark racial disparities that persist to this day in homeownership,<sup>5</sup> wealth building,<sup>6</sup> and school funding (Lukes and Cleveland 2021);
- similar disparities arose from the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill), which denied Black World War II veterans the benefits accorded to white veterans, including low-cost mortgages, low-interest business and farm loans, unemployment compensation, and tuition payments;<sup>7</sup> and
- at its inception, the Social Security program excluded domestic workers and farmworkers, in large part because those two occupations accounted for almost two-thirds of Black workers (Freddie Mac Multifamily n.d.).

As [StriveTogether](#) (a network of cradle-to-career collaboratives) notes, ignoring the role that social policies and structural barriers play in creating racialized disparities in education, health, wealth, and social mobility allows blame to be placed on individuals and their families, race, ethnicity, culture,

gender, or religion, rather than on systemic inequities (StriveTogether 2021). Doing so perpetuates unfair and discriminatory narratives about Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian-American and Pacific Islander populations as well as immigrant families experiencing poverty.

## Dismantling Structural Barriers Requires Systems Change

Policies and programs aimed at helping people navigate existing systems and surmount structural barriers provide critical benefits to some individuals and families but leave barriers in place for many, so they fail to achieve adequate population-level mobility gains or reductions in racial inequities. Current programs help too few of those in need, provide support in too few of the dimensions where support is needed, and offer benefits at levels that are too low to allow most people to achieve enduring economic mobility. For example,

- only 20 percent of households who are eligible for federal housing assistance receive it (Scally et al. 2018), and even among those who do receive it, it largely fails to provide access to high-opportunity neighborhoods or wealth building (Freddie Mac Multifamily n.d.);
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the primary cash assistance program for low-income families with children, has only kept pace with inflation in six states. And benefits from that program will still leave a family of three at or below 60 percent of the federal poverty level *in every state* (Scally et al. 2018);
- federal child care subsidies do not cover the types of care needed by parents whose jobs require them to work during the night or on weekends (Schilder et al. 2021); and
- overall, federal economic security programs reduced overall poverty by 47 percent and child poverty by 46 percent in 2017, but 44 million people remained in poverty (Trisi and Saenz 2021).

Equally important, many programs target the results of inequitable systems while leaving in place the underlying policies and practices that created and maintain structural barriers to mobility and racial equity. For example,

- homeownership counseling and down-payment assistance programs do not remedy the racial wealth gap that makes it more difficult for families of color to buy homes in opportunity-rich neighborhoods;
- mentoring programs for young men of color do not protect them from unwarranted police stops, arrests, and shootings;
- financial literacy programs cannot help families build savings if their wages fall short of basic living expenses; and
- nurse home-visiting programs cannot remedy the air and water pollution or toxic land uses that damage the health of children living in disinvested neighborhoods.

But programs can provide powerful mechanisms for driving systems changes to the community level. For example, direct programming would be the vehicle by which reallocated public dollars could increase the quality of schools, services, policing, and parks and playgrounds in historically disinvested neighborhoods.

Creating conditions that substantially boost upward mobility and advance racial equity also requires dismantling the underlying systemic barriers that block mobility. This likely requires more equitable distributions of political power as well as investments of public resources. And it calls for reexamining the underlying values, norms, and narratives that shape our current policymaking efforts. Consider, for example, a community committed to ensuring that every child could grow up in a safe neighborhood with great schools and a healthy environment. To dismantle the existing system of separate and unequal neighborhoods, the community would reallocate public dollars to neighborhoods long starved of resources to raise the quality of schools, services, policing, parks and playgrounds, and air and water quality to acceptable levels. And the community would eliminate the barriers that block families with low incomes and families of color from neighborhoods already rich with opportunities. That would involve reforming zoning codes to allow for more moderately priced homes and apartments in exclusive neighborhoods, ensuring that every neighborhood has its fair share of subsidized housing, and helping families use housing vouchers to move to neighborhoods of their choice. These policy changes probably could be achieved only if people of color and people with low incomes wielded greater political and civic power at local, regional, and state levels, shifting control away from those committed to maintaining the status quo. And the changes would hinge upon widespread shifts in prevailing narratives about who makes a good neighbor and who “deserves” to live in a quality neighborhood.

## Systems Change Spans Policy Domains and Sectors

Removing systemic barriers demands a holistic approach that addresses several levers for change through a coordinated strategy with multiple stakeholders. People striving to achieve upward mobility face a web of interconnected barriers. Interventions that are centered in one policy domain should be considered in light of challenges in other domains that could hinder their success; interventions then should be expanded to tackle those related challenges. Consider the following examples:

- Investments that improve the quality of a neighborhood’s elementary schools might extend to include efforts to improve the environment surrounding the school or remove nearby environmental hazards. Left unaddressed, exposure to environmental toxins can undermine learning gains and harm students’ physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup>
- An economic development strategy that offers new, living-wage jobs should also consider workers’ transportation and child care needs so they don’t experience barriers to applying for or keeping those jobs.<sup>9</sup>
- Programs that improve high school graduation rates should be coupled with efforts to address the racial wealth gap that makes it harder for students of color to pay for college. Without

tackling this component, these programs will have limited impact on college attendance (Aucejo and Tobin 2021).

- Investing in amenities in a long-neglected neighborhood should include efforts to address resident employment, incomes, and housing costs. Failure to consider these components may trigger a wave of new, private-sector investment that raises property values and rents, displacing long-time residents.<sup>10</sup>

To develop comprehensive strategies that consider the full range of a community's needs and assets, policymakers should engage a wide range of stakeholders and meaningfully engage residents in the policymaking process. StriveTogether advocates for a collective impact approach to support equitable outcomes for children, writing that “cradle-to-career partnerships are formal groups consisting of cross-sector organizational and system leaders (e.g., education, business, government, nonprofits, etc.) as well as grassroots organizations, neighborhood leaders, and individual members of affected populations, especially youth and families who come together around a shared community vision.”<sup>11</sup> Engaging residents in policymaking not only strengthens the policies being made, it also benefits the residents involved. Research shows that community engagement can increase social connectedness, build social capital, and increase ownership and respect for public spaces (Bogle, Edmonds, and Gourevitch 2018).

Each community needs to define its own approach to systems change—how it will set priorities and phase in change—because structural barriers, political context, and potential resources all vary by place. For example, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania and Boone County, Missouri, two sites participating in the Urban Institute's Boosting Upward Mobility from Poverty project, are pursuing dramatically different approaches. Philadelphia is starting by improving internal operations that may be inhibiting local government agencies from better serving residents who are enrolled in multiple assistance programs.<sup>12</sup> Boone's first step, on the other hand, focused on hosting a data walk with community members to kick off conversations with residents about advancing equity and upward mobility in the county.<sup>13</sup>

## Tracking Progress on Systems Change Requires Several Types of Measures

Developing systems change strategies and measuring progress over time requires a portfolio of measurement tools that includes different (but interconnected) types of measures. No single measurement can adequately assess how systems are performing. But by considering several measures together, a community can achieve a clear picture of whether a local system is boosting or blocking upward mobility and whether it is advancing equity or perpetuating injustices. Key types of measures include

- outcomes for *people* and *population groups*, including economic outcomes (like the percentage of adults earning living wages), political power (like voting rates), and belonging (like social capital);
- conditions in *places* (like the number of living wage jobs within commuting distance of each neighborhood);
- the status of *policies* that support positive outcomes (like the existence of a local living-wage job mandate) and disparities in policy coverage or implementation; and
- prevailing *narratives* or norms (like “people can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps”).

Communities should draw upon diverse information sources to assemble all four types of measures from a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources, including

- historical records documenting the causes of inequities and the evolution of specific barriers;
- administrative data that reflect the implementation and effects of local programs and policies;
- personal narratives of people experiencing poverty and blocked mobility;
- nationally available data on key outcomes for people and places;
- local surveys of attitudes and perceptions; and
- qualitative analysis of potential process and relationship changes, power maps, linkages between programs, and budget allocations.

In Fresno, California, the DRIVE Initiative’s Racial Equity Monitoring and Evaluation Plan illustrates how these multiple sources and types of data can be combined.<sup>14</sup> It includes quantitative data (average annual wages reported in state and county reports), administrative records (policy statements that establish policies and guidelines to prevent bias and discrimination), and surveys that measure self-reported change in mental models or knowledge (individuals’ level of knowledge about racism and the history of racism in Fresno).

Local leaders often need support to measure progress on systems reform. Regularly gathering data across domains, linking that data, and training people to analyze and apply it to decisionmaking can be challenging for communities. Several national organizations currently support the efforts of local partners to adopt systems changes that will meaningfully boost upward mobility and narrow racial inequities:

- The National League of Cities is providing technical assistance to eight cities to leverage American Rescue Plan Act funding, align community partners, and sustainably change the trajectory for many vulnerable families.<sup>15</sup>
- StriveTogether facilitates a cradle-to-career network of nearly 70 communities in creating better outcomes for youth.<sup>16</sup>

- The Community Foundation Opportunity Network is working with a network of seven community foundations to test the concept of aligned action around common outcomes and metrics-focused systems and strategies to dismantle structural and systemic racism and advance income, wealth, power, and leadership.<sup>17</sup>
- CFLeads is pursuing a two-year pilot made up of six community foundation teams coming together to further economic mobility agendas for their communities.<sup>18</sup>
- Opportunity Insights supports local and state policymakers, practitioners, and communities to apply research and data to develop evidence-based solutions for improved economic mobility.<sup>19</sup>
- Enterprise Community Partners works with local partners to integrate housing with effective services, education, and access to family-sustaining employment and wealth-building opportunities,<sup>20</sup> including a collaboration with StriveTogether focused on breaking down silos between housing and education systems.
- The National Association of Counties facilitates a cohort of 20 counties focused on problem-solving around issues of economic mobility, helping county government leaders identify and assess their current barriers to mobility and sharing scalable and transferable programs.<sup>21</sup>
- Results for America provides resources to local governments on evidence-based practices, programs, and policies designed to improve outcomes that drive upward economic mobility.<sup>22</sup>
- The William Julius Wilson Institute provides technical assistance and tools to community-based organizations leading place-based strategies to advance social and economic mobility.<sup>23</sup>
- The Urban Institute is providing technical assistance to eight county governments to adopt and apply a set of mobility metrics to better understand and advance upward mobility in their communities.<sup>24</sup>

Although these organizations engage with different types of local partners, prioritize different policy domains as entry points, and apply different measures of progress, all 10 are committed to learning from one another and from our local partners and aspire to expand the scope and scale of support over time to empower work on the ground in communities.

This brief aims to help local leaders better understand and articulate the importance of systems change so they can identify and track needed reforms to public policies, institutional norms and practices, and prevailing narratives. Looking ahead, we aim to develop more technical resources that synthesize the available evidence about specific systems changes required to boost mobility and advance racial equity and provide tools for measuring progress over time.

# Notes

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- <sup>9</sup> Alicia Sasser Modestino, Jamie J. Ladge, Addie Swartz, and Alisa Lincoln, “Childcare Is a Business Issue,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 29, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/04/childcare-is-a-business-issue>.
- <sup>10</sup> Benjamin Hansberger, “Gentrification Along Atlanta’s Beltline,” Furman University, July 9, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e14cb44aad5d4757b9bbdf937dbcc57a>.
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- <sup>12</sup> “About: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” Urban Institute Boosting Upward Mobility, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://upward-mobility.urban.org/counties/philadelphia-pennsylvania>.
- <sup>13</sup> “About: Boone County, Missouri,” Urban Institute Boosting Upward Mobility, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://upward-mobility.urban.org/counties/boone-county-missouri>.
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- <sup>21</sup> “Economic Mobility Leadership Network,” National Association of Counties, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.naco.org/resources/signature-projects/economic-mobility-leadership-network>.
- <sup>22</sup> “Solutions Exist. Progress Is Happening. Success Is Possible,” Results for America, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://results4america.org/>.
- <sup>23</sup> “William Julius Wilson Institute,” Harlem Children’s Zone, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://hcz.org/william-julius-wilson-institute/>.
- <sup>24</sup> “Cohort Counties,” Urban Institute Boosting Upward Mobility, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://upward-mobility.urban.org/cohort-counties>.

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