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Fifty Years after the Poor People's Campaign, Are We Achieving an Equitable Society?

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1968 was a watershed year for social justice policy and a time of great loss. By then, a Supreme Court decision—Brown v Board of Education of Topeka—had outlawed state-sanctioned segregation in public schools, and major pieces of civil rights legislation—including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—had prohibited discrimination in the workplace, public accommodations and facilities, federal agencies, and the voting booth. With this legislation established and the Fair Housing Act under way, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. turned to economic security as the next civil rights frontier. His strategy was to bring the plight of the impoverished to the attention of the nation with the Poor People's Campaign of 1967–68.[1] But Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

1968 also was the year President Lyndon Johnson created the Urban Institute to "help solve the problem that weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of all of us—the problem of the American city and its people."[2] He charged Urban to accomplish this goal through evidence that could inform public policy.[3] Over its 50 years, Urban has produced extensive evidence about the status of the nation's social and economic progress and potential policies that could advance mobility. This brief highlights some of the issues researched and potential solutions.

I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes.
—Martin Luther King Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963

Education

Education is perceived by many as a stepping stone out of poverty. But, if the quality of education varies by race, ethnicity, and income level, then this lever for mobility is impaired. While the disparity in academic achievement by race has declined, in 2009, the National Assessment for Education Progress showed that African American and Latino students were four years behind their white peers in learning (Reardon 2011). Moreover, the achievement gap between high- and low-income students was greater in 2001 than 25 years earlier.

A 2017 Urban study by Gallagher and Chingos found that states can close these achievement gaps by taking the following steps.

- **Make sure teachers are prepared.** Ensure that teachers have the training and tools they need to be successful, that they are prepared to teach students of color, and that they are equipped to educate children with varying abilities within one classroom (Ferguson 2016).

- **Hire more teachers of color.** While students of color made up the majority (52 percent) of the national school-age population in 2011–12, teachers of color accounted for only 18 percent of the faculty. Teachers of color are good role models for *all* students, and students of color perform better in math and reading, are less likely to be removed from the classroom for discipline, and experience greater long-term achievement when their teacher matches their racial or ethnic background (Dee 2004; Egalite, Kisida, and Winters, n.d.; Gershenson et al. 2017; Lindsay and Hart 2017; Villegas, Strom, and Lucas 2012).

- **Enhance school funding formulas.** When the funding per student rises, students obtain more years of education, earn higher wages, and are less likely to be poor (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2016). When Michigan replaced the local property tax that was funding schools with state funding and redistributed funds from more affluent to less affluent communities, the likelihood of students in fourth through seventh grade going to a postsecondary school increased 3 percentage points for each additional $1,000 spent on students (Hyman 2016).

- **Address achievement gaps early on.** From kindergarten through third grade students must be taught reading comprehension, not only the mechanics of reading. Gallagher and Chingos's study advised using evidence-based strategies for accomplishing this goal.

For students who pursue postsecondary education, African Americans are more likely to carry student debt and less likely to graduate than white students.[4] Forty-two percent of families headed by African Americans ages 25 to 55 had student loan debt in 2016 compared with 34 percent of similar white families. This can be explained in part by the racial disparity in transfers of wealth: white families are five times more likely than African American families to receive a large financial gift or inheritance, which can be used to pay for a college education. In 2006, 62 percent of white students graduated from college within six years compared with 40 percent of African Americans. Urban proposed two solutions in a recent report (Harris et al. 2014):

- Establish publicly funded matched savings accounts for every newborn and preserve these accounts until the child turns 18 for an investment, such as a college education.

- Implement tax reforms that reduce tax-related subsidies and use the resulting tax revenue to provide greater resources for grants.

Employment

Making the transition from school to employment can prove to be a difficult stage in life, particularly for youth of color and low-income youth. An Urban Institute brief indicated that Latino, African American and Native American youth age 16–24 are less likely to be in school or have jobs than white or Asian American youth, even after controlling for income (Spaulding 2017). African American youth face unemployment rates that are nearly twice as high as all youth and four times as high as all workers.

An important contribution of the brief is the acknowledgement of structural barriers faced by youth of color, including discriminatory hiring practices. In addition, the greater likelihood that these youth will live in a low-income neighborhood reduces their chances of attending a high-quality school and increases their odds of being targeted for school disciplinary action and arrest. The brief identifies several strategies that facilitate entry into adulthood.

- Provide access to career and college pathways during high school by combining academics and work-based learning and allowing students to enroll in college courses while in high school. Research found that these approaches improve labor market outcomes (Kemple 2008), high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion (Berger et al. 2013, 2014).

- Implement system reforms for higher education, including class schedules that better accommodate working students; cohort-based approaches and learning communities where students are engaged as full partners in their learning and collaborative activities are pursued; and more accessible financial aid, advising, and other student support.

- Provide adequate public funding for postsecondary education.

Housing

Some of Urban's most impactful research has addressed housing. One Urban study found that while overt discrimination has subsided, subtle discrimination persists (Turner et al. 2013). When well-qualified homeseekers of color attempted to rent an apartment or purchase a home, they were told about and shown fewer properties than equally well-qualified white homeseekers. This raises the price of a search for people of color and restricts their choices. Moreover, research has shown that lenders steered borrowers to subprime mortgages even when they qualified for prime loans and that families of color were targeted for these predatory loans (Agarwal and Evanoff 2013; Bocian et al. 2011).

African Americans have experienced a 5 percent decline in homeownership since 2001 compared with 1 percent for white homeowners.[5] Married couples ages 45 to 64 were the hardest hit, having lost their homes during the 2008 housing crisis, leaving them vulnerable to financial insecurity as they age and unable to pass along wealth to their children. The disparity in homeownership between African American and white families is a key contributor to the racial wealth gap.[6]

Discriminatory policies and practices resulted in segregated neighborhoods. These policies and practices included redlining—a practice that denied mortgages to residents of neighborhoods of color—racially restrictive covenants that prevented African Americans from buying, renting, or occupying white-owned homes; exclusionary zoning; and violence against African Americans who moved into white neighborhoods (Greene, Turner, and Gourevitch 2018). Many metropolitan regions across the country remain highly segregated by race, ethnicity, or income.[7] On average, white people live in neighborhoods that are 75 percent white and 8 percent African American, while African Americans live in neighborhoods that are 35 percent white and 45 percent African American (Greene, Turner, and Gourevitch 2018).

Families living in distressed segregated neighborhoods have fewer educational and employment opportunities and resources and greater exposure to environmental hazards. By contrast, more inclusive regions can yield benefits for the general metropolitan area (Acs et al. 2017). Regions that are economically inclusive have higher African American per capita and median household incomes. Regions that are more inclusive of Latinos have a higher overall life expectancy. And more racially inclusive regions have higher African American per capita incomes, lower homicide rates, and higher bachelor's degree acquisition for both African American and white residents. For example, if Chicago reduced its African American–white racial segregation, 83,000 more adults would have completed a bachelor's degree between 1990 and 2010.[8] Seventy-eight percent of these graduates would be white, and 22 percent would be African American.

Cities that have become more racially and economically inclusive offer the following lessons for achieving greater inclusivity (Poethig et al. 2018):

- Adopt a shared vision of an inclusive city through formal plans and/or community input, and frame inclusion as integral to growth.

- Develop strong leadership such as mayors and city managers and recruit diverse partners including resident groups, civil rights organizations, the business sector, and the media.

- Build the voice and power of traditionally underrepresented or disenfranchised groups.

- Assess and leverage existing community assets to improve future economic growth (Liu 2016). Examples of such assets are untapped human capital, historic buildings, or natural resources.

- Advance education, housing, economic development, and fiscal policies and programs that promote inclusivity. Examples include the education strategies discussed above, community land trusts, small business incubators, and the use of tax incentives to encourage development.

- Increase the number of housing vouchers for low-income families with children younger than age 6. This would allow families to find affordable housing in the neighborhoods of their choice (Sard, Cunningham, and Greenstein 2018).

Health

One of the most consequential health policies of the past 50 years is the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which expanded health insurance to approximately 19 million people between 2010 and 2015 (Garrett and Gangopadhyaya 2016). As a result of this legislation the share of uninsured fell from 13 to 8 percent for white people, 21 to 13 percent for African Americans, and 33 to 21 percent for Latinos.

Most of the remaining uninsured are people of color. This disparity stems in part from some states opting not to expand Medicaid as allowed under the ACA, even though the Federal government paid for all costs of the expansion through 2016, declining slightly over the next few years to 90 percent of the expansion cost from 2020 onward (Clemans-Cope, Buettgens, and Recht 2014).[9] The concentration of states in the South that have opted not to expand Medicaid led the ACA's benefits to accrue disproportionally to white families. If all states expanded Medicaid, the disparity in insurance coverage between families of color and white families would decline precipitously.

Human Services

A recent study by the Urban Institute explored whether racial and ethnic disparities exist in the delivery of federal human service programs (McDaniel et at. 2017). Its findings included the following:

- Services, treatment, and outcomes differed by race and ethnicity under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. African Americans and Latinos were more likely to be sanctioned than white participants, even after controlling for factors like work histories and the age of their children.

- African American and Latino TANF participants were less likely to receive child care, work readiness programs, education and training, and other supports. TANF caseworkers had discretion over which participants received these services.

- African Americans were more likely to receive child care subsidies from the Child Care and Development Fund than other racial groups.

- Eligible African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives enrolled in Head Start at higher rates than eligible white and Asian American families.

- African American children enrolled in Head Start were more likely to be enrolled in medium- or low-quality Head Start centers than white or Latino children.

- African American children experienced more gains than Latino and white non-Hispanic children in attentiveness, parent and peer interaction, and relationships with teachers. However, most of the differences lasted only through the end of kindergarten.

The Department of Health and Human Services is preparing to fund further research to more definitively measure racial and ethnic disparities in human services. This research should point to potential solutions for eliminating such disparities.

Criminal Justice

The criminal justice system has arguably been one of the most devastating forces impacting the lives of people of color. Studies have shown that communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by

- a shift from rehabilitative-focused incarceration to punitive-focused incarceration;[10]

- mass incarceration and increased sentences;[11]

- the increased use of SWAT teams and paramilitary weapons by local police (ACLU 2014);

- stop-and-frisk policies;[12]

- fines and loss of property (DOJ 2015; Flynn et al. 2016);

- higher rates of capital punishment for African Americans, as well as higher rates of exoneration due to wrongful convictions (Gross, Possley, and Stephens 2017);

- greater likelihood of harsh disciplinary actions for African American students than white students (Losen et al. 2015); and

- barriers to reentry that contribute to social and economic marginalization of returning citizens, as well as their families and communities (Dolovich 2012).

Five potential solutions to this array of structural barriers are explained below.

- Expand juvenile detention reform. Although juvenile crime fell sharply beginning in the mid-1990s, the detention rate did not. The Annie E. Casey Foundation designed the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative to demonstrate that juvenile detention populations could be reduced substantially and safely through collaboration between community organizations and local court systems, diagnosis of systemic problems, objective screening of youth, nonsecure

alternatives to being locked up, and the study and development of strategies for identifying and eliminating racial bias and disparities (Mendel 2014).

■ Shift to a more developmentally appropriate response to juveniles and young adults (Ishida 2015). This approach recognizes that the brains of youth ages 18–24 are still developing and that these youth have a high capacity for reform and rehabilitation.

■ Focus on a survivor-centered, racially equitable response to violence (Sered 2017). This approach posits that mass incarceration will not end violence because it is an ineffective way to change or protect people. The approach identifies the typical causes of violence as poverty, inequity, shame and isolation, and lack of opportunity, rather than individual pathology. A survivor-centered approach means asking survivors how they want to have the violence committed against them addressed. That may include, for instance, receiving trauma-informed care or having the person who hurt them repair the harm—to the extent possible—and not hurt the survivor or anyone else again.

■ Engage community leadership in violence prevention efforts, improve police and community relations, invest in community services, and reduce access to firearms in lieu of mass incarceration as a response to gun violence (Bieler et al. 2016).

■ Prohibit the use of ticketing and arrest quotas and require that officers report in writing all stops, searches, and arrests (DOJ 2015).

Wealth Accumulation and Tax Policy

According to the Federal Reserve, African Americans saw increases in their mean, or average, wealth (what you own minus what you owe) between 2013 and 2016 (Bricker et al. 2017). But the difference between the mean wealth of white families and that of African American families also expanded.[13] This growth in the racial wealth gap is captured in the Urban Institute's "Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America."[14] The racial wealth gap is not the result of individual missteps but is driven by systemic barriers such as structural racism, policies, programs, and institutional practices that facilitate wealth building for white families while inhibiting or stripping wealth from African American families.

Studies demonstrate that even when families take steps to improve their prospects, their actions alone do not close the racial wealth gap. The average wealth of African Americans with bachelor's degrees or higher ($271,000) is less than that of white high school graduates ($368,000).[15] White families headed by an unemployed worker have almost two times the average wealth ($21,892) of African American families headed by a worker employed full time ($11,649; Hamilton et al. 2015). White single parents have more than twice the wealth of married African American parents (Traub et al. 2017), and white families are five times more likely to receive an inheritance than African American families.[16]

Eliminating these structural barriers will require policy change, such as these two:

- Develop a more equitable treatment of tax subsidies that supports asset accumulation (Harris et al. 2014). Under current tax policy, roughly two-thirds of the largest subsidies go to the highest-income earners, who need them the least. To help close the racial wealth gap, tax reform could provide tax credits for first-time homebuyers and facilitate the establishment of pretax retirement savings plans and refocusing the tax benefits toward younger and lower-income households who need the benefit the most.

- Establish children's savings accounts that provide every newborn a publicly funded deposit in a savings account, with low-income babies receiving a larger deposit.[17] An alternative proposal is "baby bonds," which would provide every newborn a child development account, with babies born into families with lower wealth receiving larger accounts (Hamilton and Darity 2010).

Mobility from Poverty

This year the 24 members of the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty concluded their study of what it would take to dramatically reduce poverty (Ellwood and Patel 2018). These scholars engaged with communities across the country and combined the wisdom of these people with research and policy analysis. This process led to the conclusion that mobility is not only a matter of economic success, but also requires that people feel valued in their community, and have autonomy and power over their lives. We must do several things to achieve this kind of mobility:

- Create access to good jobs by improving pathways such as education and training, and by transforming low-paying, erratic jobs into jobs that provide good wages, benefits, and protections.

- Ensure that the neighborhood you live in does not determine how far you go by revitalizing communities while increasing access to affordable housing, reforming the justice system, increasing the availability of financial services, and improving access to high-opportunity communities.

- Provide support that is empowering to individuals and families by using a holistic approach that addresses their strengths and needs at different stages of life.

- Develop a method for providing low-income communities with access to valuable data that resides in federal, state, and local governments so that communities can use the data to generate solutions.

- Change the narrative so our stories humanize people living in poverty, identify the structural barriers that confine people to poverty, and partner with allies who can help create a more accurate narrative.

Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963

Notes

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4 Signe-Mary McKernan, Caroline Ratcliffe, C. Eugene Steuerle, Caleb Quakenbush, and Emma Kalish, "Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America (Updated)," Urban Institute, last updated October 24, 2017, http://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts/; "Table 326.10. Graduation Rates of First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at 4-Year Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity, Time to Completion, Sex, and Control of Institution: Selected Cohort Entry Years, 1996 through 2006," *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed June 20, 2018, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_326.10.asp.

5 Laurie Goodman and Alanna McCargo, "A Closer Look at the Fifteen-Year Drop in Black Homeownership," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, February 13, 2018, https://urbn.is/2HaBBme.

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7 "The Cost of Segregation," Urban Institute, accessed June 20, 2018, https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/cost-segregation.

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11 Courtney et al., "A Matter of Time," http://apps.urban.org/features/long-prison-terms/demographics.html.

12 Rose Lenehan, "What 'Stop-and-Frisk' Really Means: Discrimination and Use of Force," Prison Policy Initiative, August 17, 2017, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/stopandfrisk.html.

13 Kilolo Kijakazi, "50 Years after Martin Luther King's Death, Structural Racism Still Drives the Racial Wealth Gap," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 6, 2018, https://urbn.is/2GIknMx.

14 McKernan et al., "Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality (Updated)."

15 Lisa J. Dettling, Joanne W. Hsu, Lindsay Jacobs, Kevin B. Moore, and Jeffrey P. Thompson, "Recent Trends in Wealth-Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances," FEDS Notes, Board of

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Kilolo Kijakazi is an Institute fellow at the Urban Institute, where she works with staff to develop collaborative partnerships with organizations and individuals who represent those most affected by the economic and social issues Urban addresses, expand and strengthen Urban's rigorous research agenda on issues affecting these communities, effectively communicate the findings of Urban's research to diverse audiences, and recruit and retain more diverse research staff at all levels.

Acknowledgments

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