

RESTORING THE AMERICAN DREAM

What Would It Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty?

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Overview

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and staffed and supported by the Urban Institute, the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty was tasked with answering one big, bold question: *What Would It Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty?* Specifically, the Partnership was asked to generate ideas for investment by philanthropy and the public sector that could really make a difference.

Our Approach

A distinguishing feature of the Partnership is that we did not have a mandate for consensus. Instead, the Partnership had the freedom and flexibility to dream big and think creatively, limited only by our own knowledge and imaginations. Our focus was on learning from both research and practice, as well as from perspectives of people who have experienced poverty. Site visits and community voices were a key component of the Partnership. We intentionally held our gatherings in very different places to ground our deliberations in community-level perspectives. We spent time in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities across the country.

Through a series of design labs and learning sessions, we heard from community residents, policymakers, service providers, businesses owners, social entrepreneurs, researchers, advocates, faith leaders, and journalists. We also learned from each other. Despite the Partnership members' differing backgrounds and perspectives, we found much we could agree on, including genuine optimism about our nation's capacity to tap into the lost potential of so many and begin restoring the American dream.

Our Definition of Mobility

The Partnership's collective ambition is that *all people achieve a reasonable standard of living with the dignity that comes from having power over their lives and being engaged in and valued by their community*. Our definition includes three core principles:

- **Economic success**
- **Power and autonomy**
- **Being valued in community**

Our Proposed Strategies

The Partnership developed a series of idea papers that coalesce around an architecture of five interlocking strategies, described below:

- **Change the narrative.**
- **Create access to good jobs.**
- **Ensure zip code is not destiny.**
- **Provide support that empowers.**
- **Transform data use.**

Poverty and Opportunity in the US

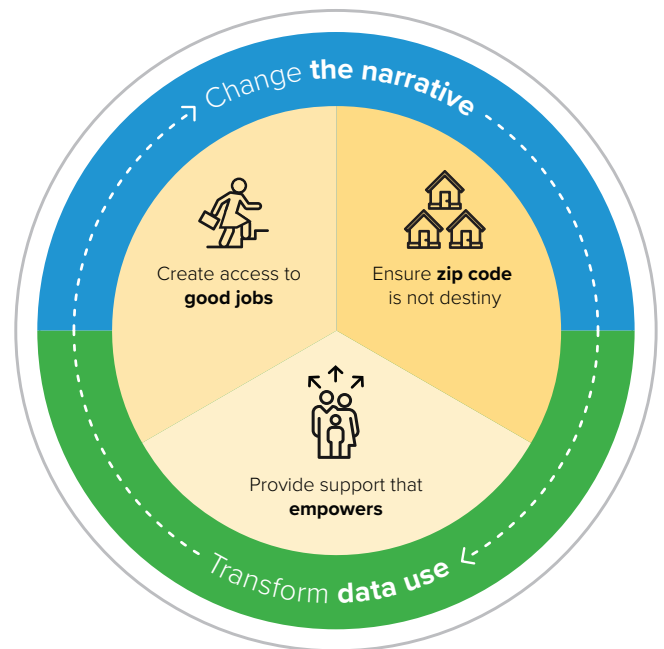
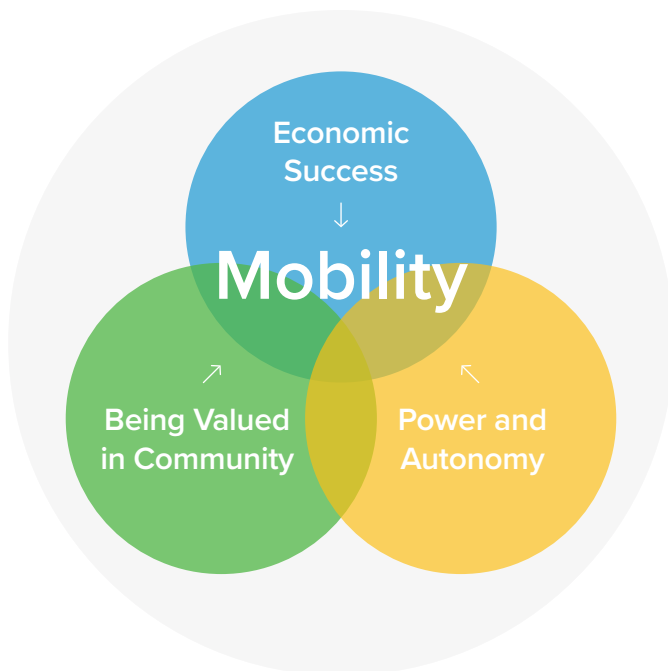
If you ask most people what the American dream is, they will often say one of two things. For many people, it is the idea that if you work hard, you can get ahead. For others—particularly people who are struggling economically—it is the idea that even if you make little progress, your children will have a chance to do better. Unfortunately, reality no longer lives up to that dream.

■ **Hard work is not enough.** Whereas 90 percent of children born in 1940 earned more money than their parents did, only 50 percent of children born in 1980 achieved similar economic advancement.

■ **Place matters.** Where a child grows up greatly influences opportunities for upward mobility. Comparing children in the same family who move from a low-opportunity to a high-opportunity area shows that children who move at age 6 fare much better than their older siblings.

■ **Disparities by race, gender, and immigration status persist.** Only 20 percent of white men are working in low-wage jobs, versus almost 40 percent of black women and 46 percent of Hispanic women and more than 60 percent of Hispanic women noncitizens.

■ **Poverty is isolating and stigmatizing.** Americans systemically “other” people in poverty. People in poverty are far more likely to be seen as “dirty,” “unpleasant,” or “violent” and far less likely to be seen as “responsible,” “family oriented,” or “hardworking.”



Strategies to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty

Partnership members believe that the challenge is great but not insurmountable. The Partnership worked to identify and develop strategies that would complement commendable and intensive efforts already under way. In some cases, we sought out innovations that would require testing and refinement. In others, we focused on proven ideas that could reach more people. In still others, we were excited by new opportunities for understanding from research. We believe that a coalition of stakeholders from government to philanthropy to private industry to faith-based communities can work to restore the American dream to a reality by pursuing five interrelated and complementary strategies. These strategies can be pursued nationally, as well as in and across local communities. And, each strategy should embody the principles of economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community.

■ **Change the narrative.** Narratives are the stories we tell ourselves and others to help us make sense of the world around us and to help us understand cause and effect. The Partnership identified three prominent and damaging narratives about poverty and mobility: people in poverty have no one to blame but themselves; people in poverty are helpless victims; and the rare, spectacular “rags-to-riches” stories prove that the American dream is still achievable. We determined three elements critical to effectively recasting narratives around poverty and mobility: humanize people living in poverty, expose the structural forces that shape poverty, and partner with allies who can help reshape the narrative.

■ **Create access to good jobs.** Today’s workers are much less likely to work for one long-term employer, belong to unions, or have jobs that provide good wages, benefits, and protections. To restore the American dream, everyone willing to work hard and learn new skills must have a pathway to a good job. The Partnership identified two underemphasized approaches that could make a real difference: improve pathways to good jobs, including education and skills training; and transform jobs with

low wages, erratic work hours, and/or limited or no benefits into good ones.

■ **Ensure zip code is not destiny.** Many low-income families live in communities suffering from disinvestment and distress. The Partnership identified four approaches that respond to the challenge: increase access to opportunity communities through efforts that combine revitalization, affordable housing, and moves to higher-opportunity areas; reform the justice system to better address the needs of people living in communities of concentrated poverty; improve access to the financial services necessary to pursue vital economic opportunities; and increase availability of safe, stable, affordable housing in high-opportunity communities for families with young children.

■ **Provide support that empowers.** Too often we deliver services in ways that stigmatize and isolate, depriving people of autonomy and responsibility. Brain scientists are also learning how pernicious the stress of deprivation and the challenge of coping with competing demands can be over different life stages. Our service delivery systems should take “whole person” and “whole family” approaches, recognizing the strengths and needs people have during different phases of human development by investing in solutions for young children, adolescents, and adults—including expansion of income support that reinforces work and autonomy (e.g., the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit).

■ **Transform data use.** Invaluable data exist in federal, state, and local governments; nonprofits; and the private sector. But in many communities, data are mostly unused and inaccessible to low-income families, program executives, or researchers. Partners propose an initiative to engage a small group of willing and committed communities to generate initial highly visible reforms and successes. The initiative would provide proven templates and metadata standards, as well as effective privacy and access protections. The value of such a core infrastructure would be championed by credible “data shepherds” to help build out to additional communities and data sources.

Conclusion

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty brought together a remarkable, diverse, and committed group of people, each tackling the issue of mobility in her or his own way. Partners came away energized by all we learned from our many site visits and learning sessions with communities, from examination of the evidence from both research and practice, and from listening to and debating with each other. From those experiences came a sense of possibility and genuine optimism, a sense that the nation really can dramatically increase mobility from poverty and restore the American dream. It cannot be done by any one group or organization or government policy. Some public and

private investors are already beginning to coordinate their efforts around increasing upward mobility, and there are opportunities for new actors to join them. The nation must come together, with leaders across a range of institutions and sectors working to advance mobility from poverty. It will not be easy, but it is achievable. We hope that the Partnership's work sparks others to get involved, dream big, and move to action.

This brief summarizes the paper Restoring the American Dream: What Would It Take to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty? The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.

The Partners

The Partnership assembled 24 of the country's leading thinkers and doers on solutions to poverty, representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector.

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