

Opportunity Neighborhoods

Margery Austin Turner, Solomon Greene, Anthony Iton, and Ruth Gourevitch

Every family should be able to live in a neighborhood that supports well-being and boosts children's chances to thrive and succeed. Yet today too many low-income families and families of color live in neighborhoods that lack resources and instead amplify the effects of growing up poor.

We lay out a proposal for a coordinated regional strategy to improve access to opportunity neighborhoods for low-income families and families of color.

The Problem

Today, almost 14 million people live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, more than twice as many as in 2000.

- Low-income families and families of color have been blocked from areas rich in amenities and opportunities by housing discrimination and exclusionary zoning.
- Low-income communities of color have been starved of capital and resources.

Every person deserves a fair shot at success, regardless of where they live

- A growing body of research suggests that growing up in a high-poverty neighborhood amplifies the effects of growing up poor.
- Both economic segregation and concentrated poverty are on the rise.

Can a coordinated, regional strategy for neighborhood investment reverse a legacy of segregation, disinvestment, and exclusion?

The Solution

We propose a significant and sustained effort to support regional “opportunity neighborhood” plans in select metropolitan areas.

This effort would engage community-based institutions, advocates, civic and business leaders, researchers, philanthropy, and policymakers in three to five regions to design and implement a 10-year plan to transform the region's geography of opportunity.

These plans would be developed through an inclusive process that engages residents.

The plans would rigorously test strategies to (1) restore well-being and opportunity to historically distressed neighborhoods, (2) preserve affordable housing in revitalizing neighborhoods, and (3) expand access to opportunity-rich neighborhoods for people living in distressed communities.

A comprehensive strategy to transform the geography of opportunity for low-income families and families of color has six building blocks:

1. **Adopt a regional approach.** Poverty has spread beyond the central city. Regional collaboration is needed to close gaps in capacity, encourage

collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries, and help overcome residents' barriers to opportunity.

2. **Be place conscious.** In most regions, a mix of place-conscious programs and policies will be needed to address the differing needs of historically distressed, revitalizing, and opportunity-rich communities.
3. **Support resident empowerment.** Residents of neighborhoods suffering from disinvestment and distress must play a leading role in designing solutions and engaging their fellow community members.
4. **Partner with and strengthen effective organizations.** Investments should strengthen the institutional capacities of local organizations working to support mobility from poverty.
5. **Use data to evaluate and refine strategy.** Investments should support evidence-based decisionmaking, and continuous learning.
6. **Confront racism.** Regional planning and implementation strategies to create and expand neighborhoods of opportunity must explicitly confront and overcome racism and its pervasive influences.

WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Broadly speaking, the role of philanthropy is to help set a diverse and representative table, support strong institutions and evidence-based decisionmaking, and make catalytic investments during plan implementation.

WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Governments can remove structural barriers to opportunity through policy reforms, strategic investments, and improved coordination to deepen impact.

WHAT DOES "MOBILITY" FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

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

Opportunity neighborhoods are part of the strategy to ensure zip code is not destiny.

HOW CREATING OPPORTUNITY NEIGHBORHOODS CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** Improvements in neighborhood quality and choice will lead to higher employment rates, higher incomes, and lower poverty.
- **Power and autonomy:** Communities will share a greater sense of agency, and indicators of civic activity, such as voting, will rise.
- **Being valued in community:** Residents of all races and ethnicities will report a greater sense of belonging and higher standing in the community and society. Experiences of discrimination and racial resentment should fall.

This brief summarizes the paper *Opportunity Neighborhoods: Building the Foundation for Economic Mobility in America's Metros*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.