

## Passing the Baton

### Honoring the Life and Legacy of Harold Richman

CSSP is proud to present a series of essays proposing actionable new insights and ideas about how to dramatically improve the well-being of children, young people, families, and communities, with racial justice as both an underlying value and a “North Star” goal. In keeping with CSSP’s bias for action, these essays revolve around two key questions: “What actions will help to achieve more equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families too often left behind in our society?” and “How will these actions counteract or reverse the historical, economic, social, and systemic forces that cause unjust outcomes?”

The essays are dedicated to the memory of one of CSSP’s two founders, Harold Richman, who along with his friend Tom Joe, established CSSP in 1979. Harold was in turn a friend and mentor to many members of CSSP’s board and staff. Scholar, teacher, and policy advocate, Harold’s advice to us was consistent: “Be dissatisfied by what you see and commit yourself to doing something about it,” he advised colleagues and generations of students. But Harold was not a fan of ill-informed action. He believed in using the best and latest knowledge to improve social policy. The essays in this CSSP series make available innovative ideas from influential leaders to do just that.

CSSP and the authors whose work is being published here offer ideas in multiple forms, designed to stimulate response, elicit interaction, and prompt action. Seven essays invite feedback and response. Six interviews with the authors further personalize their thoughts. And, CSSP will encourage dialogue around these ideas and recommendations through a variety of on-line learning sessions. We hope that you will share with us your reactions as well as your ideas in this on-going dialogue.

*To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us](#).*

## Table of Contents

- **Essay 1. Introduction—Passing the Baton: New Directions for Helping All Children and Youth Succeed**  
*Frank Farrow, Mark Joseph, and Leila Fiester*
  - [Read the essay](#)
- **Essay 2. Values, Voice, and an Equitable Vision of Validity**  
*Jara Dean-Coffey*
  - [Read the essay](#)
  - [Read a Q & A with the Author](#)
- **Essay 3. Winning on Equity**  
*Michael McAfee*
  - [Read the essay](#)
  - [Read a Q & A with the Author](#)
- **Essay 4. Building Power to Advance Health Equity and Racial Justice**  
*Tony Iton*
  - [Read the essay](#)
  - [Read a Q & A with the Author](#)
- **Essay 5. Mobilizing Youth Movements to Achieve Equitable Outcomes for Children, Families, and Communities at Scale**  
*Austin Thompson*
  - [Read the essay](#)
  - [Read a Q & A with the Author](#)
- **Essay 6. Balancing Adversity with HOPE: Reshaping Policies and Systems Around Positive Childhood Experiences**  
*Bob Sege*
  - [Read the essay](#)
  - [Read a Q & A with the author](#)
- **Essay 7. Community Leadership in a Time of Crisis and Trauma**  
*Sondra Samuels*

- [Read the essay](#)
- [Read a Q & A with the author](#)

## Passing the Baton: New Directions for Helping All Children and Youth Succeed

### ***Authored by:***

- Frank Farrow, CSSP Senior Fellow & President Emeritus
  - Mark Joseph, Professor, Case Western Reserve University
  - Leila Fiester, Founder, InDepthInk LLC
- 

### ***Jump to:***

- [The inspiration for this series of essays](#)
  - [A perspective for shaping the future](#)
  - [How the essays will be organized](#)
  - [The urgency of acting now](#)
- 



Our friend and mentor, Harold Richman—scholar, teacher, and policy advocate—believed in taking action to right society’s wrongs. “Be dissatisfied by what you see and commit yourself to doing something about it,” he advised students and colleagues. “Once you internalize that, get to work in whatever way you can.” But Harold was not a fan of ill-informed action. A lifelong student of society himself, he believed in using the best and latest knowledge to improve social policy. Without a fundamental understanding of what strategies, resources, supports, and

opportunities can be brought to bear to make society more “generous and forthcoming” to those who need it most, Harold said, “you’re just playing around the edges.”

This series of essays honors Harold’s values and commitment by capturing powerful, actionable new insights and ideas about how to improve dramatically the well-being of our nation’s children, young people, and families. In keeping with Harold’s principles, this volume positions racial equity and justice as both a value and a “North Star” goal. In keeping with Harold’s priorities, the volume focuses on strategies at the intersections of communities, systems, and policies that shape the outcomes experienced by children, youth, and families. And in keeping with Harold’s bias for action, this volume revolves around two key questions about community strategies, systems, and policies: “What actions will help to achieve more equitable outcomes for marginalized children, youth, and families?” and “How will these actions counteract or reverse the forces that cause inequitable outcomes?”

Near the end of his life, Harold was asked to articulate his vision for U.S. social policy. His response was that children born in this country are entitled to adequate food, shelter, clothing, health care, education, and love so they are “equipped to make a place for themselves in the world—and that those rights are actually met by society.”

But by almost any measure, too many children growing up in



American communities do not enjoy those rights, and society has done far too little to fulfill them. The rights, well-being, and opportunities that Harold spoke of continue to be in jeopardy, especially for children and families who have been marginalized by poverty, lack of opportunity, and systemic racism.

The data on the challenges that marginalized families and communities face are well known but still appalling, especially as they are not randomly distributed. Negative outcomes are

increasingly predictable, correlating closely with poverty, race/ethnicity, and place. Poorer children have dramatically worse outcomes than middle and upper income children, and the likelihood of negative outcomes increases almost linearly as income and wealth decrease. On every measure, children of color fare less well than White children. And children who grow up in neighborhoods afflicted with poverty, few jobs, scarce resources, and deteriorated housing are much more likely to have lifelong poor health, to drop out of or not complete school, to experience more unemployment and have fewer job prospects, and to start their own families without the economic resources to support the next generation. These outcomes occur not only for children and youth in cities but in many rural and tribal areas, too—places where economic investment has been low, jobs are scarce, and fewer resources are devoted to health and education. In particular:

- Too many children face challenges in their earliest years, with over 25 percent of American children born into poverty. Poverty rates are even higher for young children of color, with 44 percent of African American children and 42 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native children under age six living in poverty.<sup>1</sup>
- Too many children enter kindergarten without the preparation they need to succeed in school and with schools unprepared or under-resourced to meet their needs. Fewer than half (48 percent) of poor children are ready for school at age five, compared to 75 percent of children from families with moderate and high income.<sup>2</sup>
- School success is far from guaranteed for too many young people. Nineteen percent of high school students do not graduate on time, with starkly higher rates for African American, American Indian and Alaska Native youth (32 percent) and Hispanic and Latino young people (24 percent). One in seven young adults ages 16 to 24 is not attending school or working—totaling 5.6 million “disconnected” youth.<sup>3</sup>
- As the labor market changes and postsecondary education becomes even more important for future economic success, many young adults lack the skills, education, and experience they’ll need to succeed and adapt in today’s labor market. Fewer than half (48 percent) of young adults ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in or completed college in 2013,<sup>4</sup> a missed opportunity that can have lifelong negative consequences. Adults with a bachelor’s degree earn more than double the weekly income of those without a high school diploma, while the unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma is nearly three times the rate for adults with a bachelor’s degree (9 percent vs. 3.5 percent).<sup>5</sup>



The disparities in outcomes by race, income, and place have been decades and generations in the making. Their roots are complex and involve historical patterns of oppression and marginalization, disparate patterns of opportunity (or the lack of it), institutional racism, White supremacy, and the way that wealth is accumulated (or not) from generation to generation. The consequences of this structural concentration of disadvantage are intergenerational and society-wide: We are rapidly becoming a less equal and less upwardly mobile society, and if we do not confront these structural injustices boldly and comprehensively, more generations of children and young people will have their opportunities for a bright future curtailed. The urgency of opposing systemic oppression and advancing anti-racist systems and policies is increasing with time, not dissipating.

The present does not have to dictate our future, however. None of these patterns are inevitable, although they are by now deep-seated. As the essays in this volume attest, action can and must be taken to reverse the trends and forces just described. We know more today about what children, youth, and families need than we are currently using to counteract the institutionalized forces of discrimination, racism, nationalism, and oppression that contribute to racial and economic inequality. This volume seeks to accelerate change by presenting recommendations designed to confront and dismantle the systems, policies, and practices that fuel those trends and replace them with more just, inclusive, and effective ones.

The inspiration for this series of essays

Harold Richman, whose work and way of working inspired this volume, played an unusual and perhaps unique role in setting the direction of child and family programs, systems, and policy in the last decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. His thoughts and approaches influenced a great many people and affected decisions in academia, philanthropy, and government over many years. His influence still can be felt in areas as diverse as

neighborhood-based service delivery, where Harold was one of the first people to identify the importance of informal supports; community change and place-based work, where his leadership of the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change helped seed the literature of that field; and child welfare system reform, where, for example, his chairmanship of the advisory committee for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Children's Program helped put in motion the movement that led to federal legislation on family preservation and family support.



Equally as influential was Harold's legacy at the University of Chicago and as a creator of organizations. As professor and, for many years, dean of the university's School of Social Services Administration, he taught thousands of students and mentored many hundreds among them. Many of his students have now become leaders in research, human services delivery, and public policy. Simultaneously, Harold started or helped start several organizations that continue to be active and influential today. He co-founded the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, DC in the late 1970s, and CSSP remains active as a national policy and technical assistance organization 40 years later. He founded the Chapin Hall Center for Children in 1985, and it continues to be one of the nation's premier research institutions focused on children and families. Harold was instrumental in setting up children's policy centers in South Africa, Ireland, Israel, and Jordan in the 1980s and 1990s; many of those institutions, too, carry on important research and policy advocacy in their respective nations.

Harold's creation of environments in which people could learn and take action was the work he most enjoyed, but his motivation was deeper than personal satisfaction. His devotion to nurturing students and fledgling organizations grew from a conviction that a constant pipeline of committed, knowledgeable leaders and more numerous knowledge- and innovation-based organizations were essential to make progress in improving child and family well-being. He

knew that forward motion—whether at the community, systems, or policy level—requires people and organizations to sustain it.

#### A perspective for shaping the future

Applying the recommendations in this series of essays will require a different way of thinking and acting than we have used in the past. Each essay sets forth the author’s best sense of how to do that in various domains. Across the essays, several common themes emerge, in addition to the overarching theme of racial justice. Together, the themes provide perspective for viewing both the problems and the solutions. Each theme is fundamental to improving child well-being, yet the answer—and the challenge—lies in advancing all of them simultaneously and in a coherent fashion in order to realize their full, cumulative power.

The first theme is the importance of grounding solutions in an understanding of the experiences of children and young people and their families. This point would be obvious if it weren’t so often ignored. A startling gap often exists between the practice, program, and policy recommendations made on behalf of families and the realities of life for children, youth, and families who have been marginalized and denied opportunity. This reflects the tendency of researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and elected officials to talk about the people whose lives are most affected by public systems or community initiatives rather than supporting them to speak for themselves and making it possible for them to help set agendas for action. By contrast, the authors in this volume ground their recommendations in action, research, observation, and experience that is more authentically aligned with the realities of people’s lives.

A second, closely related theme is the importance of relationships,



primary supports, social networks, and connections of all types in people’s lives and as essential ingredients in any strategy to improve child and family outcomes. It has become a truism that the key to successful interventions that help children, youth, and families is “relationships, relationships, relationships,” but some truisms also are true. Previously considered “soft” elements of systems change, community

change, and even policy change, these connections have been identified by scientific inquiry and by the fields of neurobiology and epigenetics as significant at a depth we may not have imagined. Relationships of all sorts—from the earliest “serve and return” between parents and children to the complex ties that bind people together in large organizations—are the building blocks of successful human development, often propel social change, and can make the difference between success and failure of any innovation. Moreover, increasing the forms of support and assistance that create, nurture, and restore those relationships often are the most productive public- or private-sector investments.

A third theme is that multi-sectoral, multi-generational strategies are required to address the complex circumstances faced by vulnerable children, youth, and families. The issues described in these essays occur in both the private and public spheres; in fact, the authors maintain that only by combining private- and public-sector solutions—by leveraging market forces as well as the equitable and inclusionary influence of government—can the most urgent problems be solved and better outcomes for children and families achieved. The essays underscore a shift from programmatic, small-scale interventions to a systemic frame for change. And, as noted earlier, the essays focus on strategies that involve the intersection of the communities, systems, and policies that affect children’s and families’ lives.



A fourth theme is the importance of place and community—including communities that are not bound by place—as primary contexts for structural inequity and effective social change. More often than not, place and community are the environments in which many other themes (including lived experience; supports, networks, and connections; multifaceted strategies; equity and inclusion; and leadership) are manifested. A burgeoning body of evidence indicates the negative impacts of high-poverty environments on the life chances of children and their families. Tactically, a “place-conscious” focus allows for capitalizing on the synergy and targeted impact facilitated through a focus on a defined place while also paying attention to the role of systems and regional dynamics beyond that place.

A fifth theme recognizes that a focus on place and community—important as these are—is in itself not enough: increased power on the part of adults and young people living in urban and rural areas challenged by high poverty and limited opportunity is necessary in order to achieve change. This power must take hold across multiple dimensions: power of voice when decisions are made, electoral power to have representation and shape policy, power to shape public narratives and social and cultural expectations, and power to advocate for the systems and policies and opportunities that can make a positive difference for their children, their communities, and themselves.

A sixth unifying framework in these essays focuses on the desired



end of all of this work: a life course for children and young people that is built around healthy development, access to opportunity, achievement of pivotal milestones, and strong family and community ties. This theme bundles together many concepts that are gathering force as people innovate in order to achieve better results at greater scale. In some fields, this direction is referred to as a strong results or outcomes orientation, one that focuses efforts on a clear statement of the condition of child or family well-being to be achieved. In other domains, this concept is referred to as a focus on “life course.” We suggest that these are part and parcel of the same goal: framing all interventions and strategies by starting with the desired end (a whole, healthy, and successful life) in mind and mapping backward to make sure the necessary aligned contributions are made. This theme also embraces a broader definition of evidence in understanding “what works.”

Finally, many of the change strategies discussed in this volume envision a change process that pays much more attention than in the past to the roles and characteristics of the people, organizations, and institutions that lead and sustain change, and to ensuring that the people who tackle the tough job of changing systems or transforming communities have the necessary

skills and support. Here the alignment between the themes of this volume and the values and work of Harold Richman comes full circle: Developing new leaders and effective institutions for the next generation was one of Harold's longest-lasting legacies.

#### How the essays will be organized

Each essay in this series addresses an important topic related to improving child and family well-being by tracing the origins of a challenge, envisioning a different future, and charting a course to get there. The recommendations are practical, feasible, and actionable. Their message is that dramatic improvements will require fundamental and long-term changes to many aspects of American society, but the bridges from here to there are manageable and capable of producing results within the next decade.

The authors come at these themes from many directions. Jara Dean-Coffey offers a call to action to develop and use a more equitable approach to knowledge development and the use of evidence, with transformed attention to voice and a more inclusive approach to validity. Michael McAfee challenges individuals and organizations to engage in the personal growth and organizational changes that are necessary for a racial justice and anti-racist lens to pervade policy and systems that support children, youth, and families. Robert Sege portrays and recommends the use of breakthroughs in developmental science, brain science, epigenetics, and neurobiology, and their potential to transform human services policy and practice. Austin Belali writes about the importance of movement building as an essential vehicle for change. Sondra Samuels describes the challenges and opportunities in developing leadership for complex community change at the individual, collaborative, and organizational levels. Tony Iton suggests future directions for uniting "people power" with policy and systems change to accomplish needed transformation in health outcomes and the broad social determinants of health.

#### The urgency of acting now



The essay authors have one more

thing in common: a sense of urgency. For every year that passes without dramatic improvements in promoting healthy development for infants and toddlers and preventing early trauma, we compromise the lifelong health of hundreds of thousands of young children and youth. With every five years that passes without major improvement in academic outcomes for poor children and children of color, we have several million young people who will not be able to earn the wages to start and maintain thriving families of their own. And for every decade that goes by without major gains in these and many other areas, we lose too many members of another generation of young people.

Harold Richman certainly felt this urgency acutely. As a long-time friend and former student of his once recalled, Harold often greeted people with two questions: “How are you?” And, “What are you doing to change the world?” The ideas advanced in this book are only a partial response to that vital second question. But if they inspire and inform the creative efforts of the many other people who are driving change, we all may be able to heed Harold’s admonition to stop “playing around the edges.” In that sense, this volume represents a passing of the baton. This is what we know. Now it’s time for the next generation of change agents in the field, using this knowledge, to take social welfare policy and practice to the next level.

---

***To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us.](#)***

---

### ***Sources***

<sup>1</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. (March 2014). “Results-based Public Policy Strategies for Reducing Child Poverty.” Retrieved online.

<sup>2</sup> Brookings Institute. (March 2012). "Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children." Retrieved online.

<sup>3</sup> Opportunity Nation, "Who are the 5.6 million disconnected youth, and how did they end up so off-course?" Retrieved online.

<sup>4</sup> KIDS COUNT Data Center. "Young Adults Ages 18 to 24 Who are Enrolled in or Have Completed College." Retrieved online.

<sup>5</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Projections 2015." Retrieved online.

## Essay 2

Values, Voice, and an Equitable Vision of Validity

**Authored by:**

**Jara Dean-Coffey**

**Director, Equitable Evaluation Initiative**

[Read a Q & A with author Jara Dean-Coffey.](#)



---

**Jump to:**

- [Concepts of Validity](#)
- [Redefining Voice as Core to Validity](#)
- [In Closing](#)

---

So here we are, beginning the third decade of the 21st century. The United States is increasingly diverse demographically, reflecting a great variety of experiences, perspectives, and insights. Data continue to have a powerful role in our understanding of ourselves, each other, and our collective, albeit divided, American society. 2020's racial justice awakening, stemming from a deeper understanding of the ways in which structural racism contributes to inequity, and from the disproportionate toll that COVID-19 has taken in different racial communities, has made it more challenging, going forward, to ignore some truths about this country that have always been so.

This dynamic and complex reality cannot be reduced to the simplified expressions of data often depicted in dashboards and charts. There is growing acknowledgment that "voice" brings life to

data that, often, are quantitative. This voice tends to be that of the people most impacted by specific conditions or outcomes. Their experiences and perceptions are increasingly considered when designing, implementing, or evaluating the strategies and programs that contribute to healthy, thriving, and sustainable communities. Still, although story and narrative are increasingly seen as meaningful and important, they are rarely considered to be “data” or “evidence.” Why?



It’s about validity—whether the data are considered sound, cogent, and factually acceptable. Sociopolitical decisions, policies, systems, and structures have long been shaped by methods that inherently give greater value and validity to certain types of data and analysis than to others.<sup>1</sup> The dominant (e.g., White and Western) concept of validity remains grounded in a preference for that which is empirical and objective and lends itself to quantitative representation.<sup>2</sup> Diversity and lived experience often are merely used to “color” the analysis. A construct of validity that reflects equity would more fully express the many dimensions of individual identity and the many elements—organizations, systems, and networks—that define the uniqueness of communities.

This essay considers what validity represents, who defines it, and how those definitions implicitly or explicitly reinforce hidden values and intentions. I then suggest a frame for validity (informed by and building on the work of others) that can deepen our understanding of complex environments, create more accurate narratives about what is working for whom (and how), and move us closer to a world that affirms human dignity and puts equity and liberation within grasp.

Concepts of Validity

It is important to understand how we got here so we can determine how to get to somewhere new. Several dominant research and evaluation paradigms have informed how we tend to conceptualize validity. They include:

- Positivism, which views data as “something that exists, are [already] there, and are observable... there is no relationship between the self and knowledge,”<sup>3</sup> and post-positivism, which acknowledges that “divisions between objectivity and subjectivity, or public and private knowledge, or scientific and emotional knowledge, are socially constructed”;<sup>4</sup>
- Social constructionism,<sup>5</sup> which states that reality is socially constructed and is interested in how these constructs come to be;
- Pluralism and pragmatism<sup>6</sup>—the former being the view that multiple truths and versions of rightness exist, and the latter a belief that there is “a” right—a singularity; and
- Critical realism,<sup>7</sup> which asserts that there is a world independent of human beings that has deep structures and that the structures can be represented by scientific theories, which are central to this paradigm.

Each of these paradigms tackle one or more of three core questions posed by Guba and Lincoln:<sup>8</sup> 1) what the form and nature of reality is and, therefore, what can be known about it; 2) what the nature of the relationship is between the knower (or would-be knower) and what can be known; and 3) how the inquirer (would-be knower) can go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known. What is missing from all of these paradigms, however, is the axiological question that asks:

What kind of information and knowledge, if any, is fundamentally and inherently valuable and important; what (whose) assumptions does the information reflect; and what (whose) intention does the information advance?

That unasked question matters because who we are matters, as does where we stand in relation to place and power. Those attributes affect what we see, what we believe, and how we make sense of (i.e., validate) things. They also shape the questions we ask (and don't ask)

### Essay 3

Winning on Equity

***Authored by:***

**Michael McAfee**

**President and CEO, PolicyLink**

[Read a Q & A with author Michael McAfee.](#)



---

***Jump to:***

- [From charity to systems change](#)
  - [Servant leadership, accountability for results, and personal mastery](#)
  - [Toward a new equity ecosystem](#)
-



Over the past 25 years, the equality movement has inspired millions of people to fight for justice, fairness, and inclusion for all. Advocates have chipped away at policies that perpetuate racial and economic disparities. The movement has propelled leaders from business, civil society, faith communities, government, and philanthropy to work to build a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

Now the movement is poised for its next leap forward: winning on equity. The work of this moment is to turn the eyes of movement leaders toward enacting structurally transformative solutions that redesign America to finally fulfill the promise of a just and fair society for all.

Winning on equity requires the rules of the economy and our democracy to change, so that the will of the majority can once again influence representative government on core matters of political economy. It also requires our institutions to shift from being exploitive and rededicate themselves to serving the most vulnerable in America. This requires a sweeping, coordinated, and sustained course of action that frees our democracy from an oppressive blend of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. This work challenges leaders to build and fully exercise their power, leave incrementalism behind, and hold themselves accountable for achieving society-wide results.

Setting our sights on winning may sound overly idealistic in the face of right-wing forces determined to highjack democracy and use race as a divisive wedge to maintain White male power and keep wealth flowing to a privileged few. It is not. I accept Zadie Smith's insistence that "progress is never permanent, will always be threatened, must be redoubled, restated and reimagined if it is to survive."<sup>1</sup> This is our time to manifest radical imagination and ensure that equity reigns.



Opposing forces know the winds of change are pushing equity forward. People of color will become the majority of the United States' population by 2044.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, idealism is translating into collective action in communities across America. The nation is witnessing the largest activist outpouring in decades, and the first to bring people together across lines of identity, including race, national origin, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, the Dreamers, March for Our Lives, and countless other campaigns and alliances are stepping forward to demand a more just, fair, inclusive, safe, and healthy society. The knowledge accumulated over decades of community building and organizing point the way forward.

By harnessing the wisdom and experience of our elders, and the passion, optimism, rage, and imagination of youth, equity leaders can achieve the transformative results this nation sorely needs.

This transformation can't come soon enough.

Inequality has reached toxic levels. Nearly one-third of the population lives in or near poverty. Wealth is more concentrated than at any time since the eve of the Great Depression, with the top 0.1 percent of families owning roughly 20 percent of household wealth—about the same share held by the entire bottom 90 percent.<sup>3</sup> Across the ideological spectrum, people are demanding the basics for a life of dignity and possibility: good jobs, affordable housing, food, access to opportunity where they live, decent prospects for their children, and leaders and institutions that deliver on promises while also operating fairly and transparently.

Commodification has put these things out of reach for many folks. When we win on equity, these basic essentials of community infrastructure should no longer be greedily commodified.



By focusing on achieving society-wide impact, leaders can improve opportunity for millions of people, and the benefits will ripple outward to buoy the nation. America has done this before when we put our minds to it. For example, the G.I. Bill, officially titled the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, enabled 8 million veterans to go to college, producing 14 future Nobel Prize winners, three Supreme Court justices, three presidents, 238,000 teachers, 450,000 engineers, and numerous doctors, dentists, lawyers, nurses, and entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, federally backed healthcainterest home loans for veterans boosted homeownership from 44 percent before World War II to 60 percent by the mid-1950’s.<sup>5</sup> Together, these education and housing supports created the White middle class and secured the booming economy of the mid-20th century.

While the story was different for communities of color—especially for Black veterans, who received far less generous subsidies for college<sup>6</sup> and were often excluded from obtaining mortgage loans or buying homes in desirable communities—the transformative results of these investments and the financial returns are clear nonetheless. Historians estimate that for every \$1 invested in returning World War II veterans, the country recouped \$8.<sup>7</sup>

It’s also clear what leaders must do to expand opportunity in today’s most vulnerable communities and put children and families on a path to success. Years of practice, research, and theory show us what works. *Voices from the Field III*, for example, distilled the valuable lessons learned by the frontline leaders of community revitalization initiatives—most crucially, the need for comprehensive approaches to address power imbalances, driven by the wisdom, voice, and experience of residents.<sup>8</sup> Obama administration initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, and Sustainable Communities embraced those lessons by supporting comprehensive, intersectional place-based efforts and pushed the field forward by infusing

robust data collection and analysis, requirements for meaningful community engagement, and a focus on results for communities with low incomes.

The task today is to pick up where our predecessors left off, to draw on their successes and learn from their setbacks as we complete the unfinished work of the equality movement in this current equity moment: undoing the White-supremacist mental frame that has been seared into our collective minds by 500 years of intentional efforts to convince us that Blacks and other people of color are inferior. This requires a shift in consciousness in this nation away from anti-Blackness, and an intentionality around race-based policy. That has to precede our ability to get what we want, because when mental models are still White supremacist in their framing, when we still subconsciously and intuitively see Blacks and other people of color as fundamentally inferior, then we can't imagine how investment in them can help everyone. Without undoing this mental frame, we won't get the policy decisions that will enable us to achieve results at scale.<sup>9</sup>

For more than two decades, PolicyLink, the organization that I am now privileged to lead, has driven systems and policy changes to advance equity and eliminate barriers to opportunity and economic mobility. Race is embedded in everything we do. Communities of color bear disproportionate burdens of poverty and inequality<sup>10</sup> and struggle daily against the harsh realities of structural racism. If the nation is to translate the vast cultural assets of its diversity into a wellspring of prosperity for everyone, it must address the history, legacy, and reality of structural racism and oppression, from the enslavement of blacks and the genocide of Native Americans to the mass incarceration of men of color, the forced separation of immigrant families, and sexual harassment and exploitation.



Winning on equity will require leadership with the courage to be disruptive and the humility to join in solidarity with others to realize shared goals. As president and CEO of PolicyLink, I am engaging staff in reimagining our impact as an equity organization at this pivotal national moment. If we are to be effective—indeed, if we are worthy to exist as an institution—we must carry the work forward by focusing explicitly and relentlessly on one population: the 100 million people in America living below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. This population includes half of all people of color and a quarter of Whites, and it is growing twice as fast as the nation overall.<sup>11</sup> Guided by this focus, PolicyLink is setting priorities and organizing its work around one powerful result: All people have economic security, live in healthy communities of opportunity, and benefit from a just society.

Equity does not mean taking something away from one person and giving it to another, and our population focus is not about benefitting one group at the expense of another. When systems and policies are designed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities—when the nation invests in and taps its full human capabilities, believing that everyone brings something to the table—opportunities and results improve for everyone.<sup>12</sup> However, naming and quantifying the population at the center of our work does create healthy stress on the organization and me. It is exhilarating. It elevates our practice, improves our ability to track progress, and holds us accountable for doing work that makes a significant difference. Perhaps most importantly, naming the population lays the foundation for establishing a new equity ecosystem, one that facilitates solidarity, accelerates results, amplifies the voices of equity leaders and communities, ascribes value to everyone regardless of race and income status, and builds our collective power to design an America that works for all.

From Charity to Systems Change



The turning point in my leadership journey—the pivot that focused me on population-level results—came during my year in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Children and Family Fellowship. The program seeks to increase the capacity of leaders to serve youth and families in meaningful ways. I had previously served in the Army, at a community foundation, and in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where I managed a portfolio on affordable housing and community economic development. My experiences across sectors had shown me that leaders often lack clarity about the power and potential of the work that needed to be done. This diminishes their effectiveness and impact, leading them to focus on charity rather than the structural changes that would eliminate poverty, and the need for charity, in the first place.

The fellowship gave me the reflective space to consider how I can lead most effectively to have a significant impact. I immersed myself in the literature of equity and came to appreciate the profound cultural shift the movement has achieved. Since the early 1990s, equity has progressed from a vague goal held by a small circle of thought leaders and veterans of the civil rights movement, into a broadly embraced vision with well-articulated principles and framing that drive multi-sector organizing and advocacy. The quest for equity has spurred grassroots leaders throughout the country to confront the toughest challenges facing their communities, from building pathways to success for children and families to fighting for just, supportive, accountable systems of community safety to creating good jobs and opportunity-rich communities for everyone.

I realized that my generation of leaders has inherited a sound evidence base and proven approaches and strategies developed by those who have struggled before us. Their successes

have taught us how to do good community-building work. We have learned how to engage the voice, wisdom, and experience of families to shape priorities, planning, and implementation. We know how to provide strong, comprehensive, integrated supports that offer paths to the middle class. We have figured out how to implement pilots and initiatives that strengthen the capacity of leaders, organizations, and residents to lead and collaborate with greater discipline. When the resources are available, we know how to incorporate programmatic, systemic, and policy solutions to address the urgent needs of young people and families as well as structural inequities at the root of complex problems.

Our challenge is to use these gifts to make a significant difference in the lives of millions of people who are working and/or have low incomes. This cannot happen if we allow our work to be driven by grant requirements, organizational demands, or assessments of what's feasible in a two- or three-year funding cycle. Rather, the work must be driven by a commitment to doing the work that the 100 million people who are economically insecure are asking us to do. We must listen and deliver on their demands.

I also realized that conservatives have worked shrewdly and systematically for decades to achieve big results. Today they are reaping the benefits. In a 1971 memo, Lewis Powell, then a corporate attorney and later a Nixon appointee to the U.S. Supreme Court, outlined a long-term strategy for the corporate capture of American democracy, including the media, the judiciary, the political arena, college campuses, and Wall Street. The centerpiece was shaping the Supreme Court to serve the interests of the rich at the expense of working people and the poor.

The success is evident in the long list of Court rulings in recent years, including thwarting gender discrimination claims, defeating state and local litigation to regulate greenhouse gases, and denying consumers the right to take claims against corporations to trial.<sup>13</sup> The list is likely to grow for years, given the Court's new conservative majority and the recent onslaught of conservative appointments to the federal bench.

In tandem with the judiciary overhaul, the Southern strategy, formulated in 1981 by Republican operative Lee Atwater, effectively redrew the political map by playing on racial bigotry to build conservative support among White voters in the South. The strategy reinforced and updated systems of White supremacy and racial oppression, from privatizing education to suppressing votes to locking up millions of Black and Brown people.

As David Callahan described in *Inside Philanthropy*, funders on the right financed the conservative overhaul.<sup>14</sup> It was one of the most dramatic examples of high-impact giving in the past half-century. Meanwhile, mainstream and liberal foundations responded with scattershot programs and small-scale initiatives, essentially allowing the concerted assault on their values and accomplishments to go unchecked. They “failed to act on a central reality of modern

politics: If you can't win and hold power within America's key institutions, you risk losing on every issue that you care about," Callahan writes.

Needless to say, equity leaders and supporters must resoundingly reject the toxic fury at the core of right-wing politics. But the equity movement will be no match for our adversaries if we continue to devote most of our time, energy, and resources to doing what I call charity—creating and running programs that help a few hundred or several thousand people while leaving intact the rules of the game in this nation, which favor the rich and hurt millions of poor and working people.

The nation needs charity and a strong safety-net infrastructure. But these are not enough, and our movement must not mistake such supports for social progress. To improve outcomes for the most vulnerable people, leaders must change systems and policy, master the rules of democratic power, and capture and hold the highest ground of American politics—law, fiscal policy, regulation, and the dominant narratives of public discourse—so the need for charity is diminished and opportunity is unleashed.

#### Servant Leadership, Accountability for Results, and Personal Mastery

In addition to giving me time to reflect on my leadership, the Annie E. Casey fellowship introduced me to the language and tools needed to achieve results at scale. Robert Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership was revelatory.<sup>15</sup> It inverts the dominant logic of how to advance large-scale change, demanding that our work be guided by the needs of people, not the needs of our organizations, the prevailing political winds, the dictates of funders, or our own egos. Servant leadership calls upon us to show up knowing and articulating whom we want to serve and at what scale. What commitment will we make to serve that population? How will we measure progress?

Results-Based Accountability (RBA), helps answer these questions. It offers leaders a structured, commonsense, data-driven approach to make measurable change for populations and monitor progress along the way.<sup>16</sup> This technical proficiency is important to help us move the work, but it is equally important to have a broader consciousness of the moment we're in. Otherwise, RBA can only help us make incremental improvements. Winning on equity asks us to consider, Do we understand the evolution of this society and are we ready to do the work that this moment requires of us?



The moment we are in requires us to dismantle a White supremacist consciousness so that we can actually “hold all” in the statements that we make. We can’t hold all today because our mental model is corrupted—and it isn’t just corrupted by Whites, it’s even corrupted by those of us of color, in many instances. This is not a critique; it is just an acknowledgement of how we’ve evolved. The beauty is that we have a chance to evolve further and fix it, to acknowledge that racism is a mental model that has guided the development of this nation but we can consider a more expansive way of seeing this world, this democracy, this economy. If we held a mental model that was not oriented in White supremacy, for instance, we wouldn’t have an economy that calls frontline workers heroes but strips their power as workers.

During the fellowship I also found inspiration in the concept of personal mastery. One of the five learning disciplines in Peter M. Senge’s book *The Fifth Discipline*, it challenges leaders to do tough internal work to understand how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affect other people, situations, and our ability to effect change.<sup>17</sup> Often when we talk about systems change, we talk about it as if systems are impersonal, mechanical things. But systems are human beings making decisions, and those human beings have a consciousness by which they make decisions about policies and legislation. We are authorized as leaders of our institutions to do something, to raise our consciousness as a way to get to systems change.

I had the chance to operationalize these ideas and competencies—and continue learning—when I joined PolicyLink in 2011 as the director of the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink (PNI).<sup>18</sup> The institute was established to support more than 60 communities across the country and abroad in building on lessons learned from the renowned Harlem Children’s Zone, which provides a cradle-to-career pipeline of high-quality health, social, community, and education supports for children and families living in a 100-block area of

northern Manhattan. Most of the communities served by PNI participate in the federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative.<sup>19</sup>

I saw the federal initiative as an historic opportunity to create the coordinated, comprehensive, integrated supports that nonprofit executives and community leaders had always said were needed to change the odds for children with low income. It would not be enough for PNI to support communities in fulfilling grant requirements and creating programs. This was a moment to reimagine the possibilities and rise to the challenges of improving outcomes for a significant number of youth and families.

I knew that even good programmatic work would have only small-scale impact and squander the potential of the moment. Further, structural racism—the systems by which policies and institutions reinforce and perpetuate racial inequity—threatened to undermine the best efforts of educators, service providers, and parents. I realized I had to do more than perform the standard functions of an intermediary—visit sites, write papers, give speeches, and help providers check off the boxes on grant reports. I had to be of service to the 14 million children experiencing poverty in this country.

In declaring this commitment to the communities we supported, to our sisters and brothers in the field, and to myself, the institute's work became clear. We would step up our ambition, performance, and leadership by infusing a focus on equity, an explicit intention to achieve results at scale, evidenced-based strategies to get there, and the use of data for continuous improvement and shared accountability. Additionally, PNI would help communities maximize impact by implementing the right mix of solutions. This includes excellent programs and services, family involvement and accountability, and changes in systems and policies that squelch human potential and success.

PNI capitalized on the federal initiative's strong results framework, which spelled out 10 results and 15 indicators that grantees must meet, and then developed sophisticated data infrastructure that served as a common platform for Promise Neighborhoods. This allowed each community to track its progress and share challenges and solutions. The common data platform also helped knit a patchwork of grantees into a network of leaders sharing a journey to improve prospects and quality of life for entire communities. To further strengthen the network and leadership capacity, PNI and the Annie E. Casey Foundation brought together Promise Neighborhood leaders every six weeks to zero in on a specific result or an indicator, identify what worked or did not, and come up with ways to improve performance and scale successes.

The population focus propelled leaders to expand their vision and press for changes in hostile systems that sustain racial inequity and undercut progress made by Promise Neighborhoods. For example, harsh disciplinary practices disproportionately push students of color out of

school, widening the achievement gap that the initiative seeks to close. In 2014, Bernadeia Johnson, then the superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, a Promise Neighborhood partner, issued a moratorium on suspensions of children in first grade or younger.<sup>20</sup> A year later, the district expanded the ban to all elementary grades.<sup>21</sup>



In another example, Promise Neighborhoods worked to strengthen family financial security, which research shows has a significant effect on student achievement and college attendance.<sup>22</sup> Yet while Promise Neighborhoods in San Francisco and elsewhere helped children and parents set up bank accounts, families saw their finances eroded by excessive, racially disproportionate court fines and fees. In the spring of 2018, after strong advocacy by Promise Neighborhood leaders in San Francisco, the city passed an ordinance eliminating certain administrative court fees that had done nothing to deter crime but had unfairly burdened people of color with low incomes, their families, and their communities.<sup>23</sup>

With its discipline and good results, the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative moved from a federal pilot to an authorized program.<sup>24</sup> It has seen increases in appropriations even after the presidential election of 2016, rising to \$73.3 million in FY 2017.<sup>25</sup> In rural and urban Promise Neighborhoods, kindergarten readiness, standardized test scores, and parent engagement have increased, while absenteeism has declined. In Minneapolis, 69 percent of students in the Northside Achievement Zone graduated on time in 2016, up from 51 percent four years earlier.

The Promise Neighborhoods model has demonstrated how to get results for children and families more efficiently and effectively, and at a larger scale than can be achieved through piecemeal approaches. But we cannot stop there.

Toward a New Equity Ecosystem

Winning on equity will not happen through programmatic responses or advocacy campaigns that nibble at the edges of the most egregious systems, policies, and practices. Winning on equity will take a determined, aligned, well-funded movement capable of rewriting the rules of our democracy to serve the will of the majority and the needs of all people. And it will demand discipline, urgency, and unwavering conviction over many years, because creating an equitable America is not a three-to-five-year venture but a generational commitment.

Broadly outlined, a winning strategy requires the following five steps.

1. **Set the standard.** Movement leaders must be able to articulate whom we want to serve, at what scale, and what commitments we will make to accomplish what we say we're going to do. This is a tenet of servant leadership. It's also a basic rule of business. Automakers, for instance, know how many cars and trucks they want to sell, what kinds, and where. Companies set the bar and then unify to push forward the right transportation, environmental, trade, and tax policies that support their collective growth and success. The equity movement needs to set an ambitious, well-defined standard that describes the outcomes we want to see for the most vulnerable children and families and for the nation overall. This standard can guide leaders in identifying priorities and developing strategies that upend outdated rules, regulations, systems and institutions, and replace them with mechanisms designed to produce the results we want. A broadly shared equity standard also can guide and inspire philanthropy and other investors to aggregate capital and deploy it in ways that significantly improve opportunities for millions of people.
2. **Build and manifest power.** History demonstrates that imploring officials and institutions to be responsive to the needs of vulnerable people and places does not produce significant results. What moves the needle is power. The equity movement must structure our ecosystem to align leaders and organizations across sectors, geography, and lines of identity in crafting a transformative agenda and harnessing our collective power to drive it forward. Building power requires mastery of certain competencies, such as Results-Based Accountability, for moving from ideas to action. Building power also challenges leaders to use ourselves as instruments of change, holding ourselves accountable for results that make many lives better and for collaborating with others effectively to solve tough problems. Leaders need to be able to honestly confront issues of race, ethnicity, class, culture, and gender, which have such an enormous impact on inequities and power dynamics in the nation and on relationships within our movement. Collectively, we must go beyond the standard movement playbook of organizing and advocacy. To influence government on core matters—and to capture and hold government office—equity leaders must understand the rules of modern

democratic governance and use every lever of power available. We need to become a dominant force in electoral politics, the appointment of judges, and regulatory processes. This will require long-term investments in power building and leadership development over 20- to 50-year arcs—not the short time frame of a traditional funding cycle.

3. ***Hold individuals, institutions, and corporations accountable.*** It is morally unacceptable for individuals and institutions to harm the people they're supposed to serve, and it undercuts the good results we hope to achieve for children and families. In Flint, Michigan, for instance, the Promise Zone program seeks to improve student performance and increase college attendance. Yet the drinking water system, which lead-poisoned thousands of children and contributed to—or perhaps caused—a 75 percent decline in third-grade reading proficiency from 2014 to 2017<sup>26</sup>—is still unsafe to use. Equity leaders must hold public-serving institutions and officials accountable to the standard we set for the population. We also must mobilize corporate shareholders to demand similar accountability from CEOs. When a water system is so thoroughly broken that it sickens people, we should not be placated by free bottles of water but demand the right leadership, systems, and financing to fix the problem. If the rule makers and guardians of our democracy and economy fail to meet the standard of equity, our movement should be prepared to mobilize to vote them out of office or use the full might of our advocacy and organizing to have them removed immediately. We must be fierce and unapologetic in expecting and demanding that the most vulnerable in this nation will no longer be harmed by people and institutions that consciously or unconsciously maintain oppressive, opportunity-stripping systems.
4. ***Achieve results at scale.*** The limited aspirations of incrementalism are no match for the scale of the nation's challenges. Racial hostility, deep poverty, and skyrocketing inequality make this the moment to usher in the next generation of change: visionary policies that guarantee prosperity for all. An example is a Federal Job Guarantee that would create publicly financed jobs for all adults who want to work. Momentum is growing for a jobs guarantee, which would narrow racial gaps in employment and address other systemic problems, such as wage stagnation, that mire families in financial insecurity and uncertainty about their children's future. A job guarantee also could be transformative for neighborhoods, regions, and the nation. Imagine the ripple of benefits if people returning from prison, veterans, and others who now face barriers to employment were hired to build housing in Los Angeles to solve the city's crisis of homelessness, or lay broadband in rural and tribal communities, or construct clean water systems in Flint. Policy advocacy, however, may not always get us where we need to go. In some instances, people *en masse* may have to opt out of failing systems to

compel them to address the needs of the people they exist to serve. For example, how would mayors, governors, and school districts respond if millions of parents kept their children home *en masse*, across the country, until there was a demonstrable turnaround in deteriorating, under-resourced schools—doing so not in response to a pandemic but because those schools will never deliver the quality of education necessary to prepare their children for an equitable future? Sometimes a turnaround may be impossible because the system is built on a foundation of injustice and oppression. Leaders may have to abolish such systems and design fairer, more supportive, community-driven alternatives. For example, leaders on the cutting edge of criminal justice activism realize the limitations of reforming outdated, oppressive police and prison systems. Instead, they are working to build new systems for community safety, including community-based rapid-response networks and resident-led institutions that protect people, uphold justice, support healing, and operate without bias. The imagination and creativity animating these efforts should inspire us all.

5. ***Examine mental frames and change the national mindset.*** We have to raise consciousness not only at the level of individual leaders and the systems they lead, but nationally. And, because that consciousness must be applied to decisions to make a difference, and because decisions are shaped by mindsets, we also have to change the mindset that people in this country have about race and equity. As James Baldwin wrote, “We made the world we’re living in and we have to make it over.” It is time for us—equity leaders, activists, and people everywhere—to remake America, guided by the north star of equity and the needs and aspirations of the most vulnerable, especially people of color. The equity movement is ready to become central in strengthening our democracy. In this moment, if we listen to the wisdom of our ancestors, the leaders who preceded us, and the millions of vulnerable people who are telling us what they want and need, the call to action is clear: Structurally redesign the nation so that opportunity for all reigns supreme.

[Read a Q & A with author Michael McAfee.](#)

---

**To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us.](#)**

---

### **Sources**

<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith, “On Optimism and Despair,” *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 22, 2016. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/22/on-optimism-and-despair/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://nationalequityatlas.org/data-summaries?geo>

- <sup>3</sup> <https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/SaezCEP2017.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Edward Humes, *Over Here: How the GI Bill Transformed the American Dream*, Harcourt, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Chuck Leddy, "A Critical Look at the GI Bill's Impact," *The Boston Globe*, September 10, 2009. [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl\\_report\\_for-love-of-country\\_FULL%20REPORT\\_102721\\_a.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl_report_for-love-of-country_FULL%20REPORT_102721_a.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Jared Lyon, "The GI Bill's Impact on the Past, Present and Future," Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University, June 21, 2013. <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/images/rcc/VoicesfromtheFieldIII.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> PolicyLink defines results at scale as population-level impact that achieves at least 51 percent saturation.
- <sup>10</sup> <http://nationalequityatlas.org/data-summaries?geo>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.policylink.org/our-work/100-million-economically-insecure>
- <sup>12</sup> Angela Glover Blackwell, "The Curb-Cut Effect," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2017. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_curb\\_cut\\_effect](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect)
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-right-packed-court/>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2018/10/9/defeat-how-top-foundations-failed-to-stop-the-conservative-march-to-powerand-now-risk-losing-everything>
- <sup>15</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*, Paulist Press, 2002.
- <sup>16</sup> <https://clearimpact.com/results-based-accountability/>
- <sup>17</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, New York: Doubleday, 2006
- <sup>18</sup> Partnership of PolicyLink, the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), and the Center for the Study of Social Policy
- <sup>19</sup> Promise Neighborhoods translates the HCZ model into policy and investments aimed at improving education outcomes and reversing the cycle of generational poverty. The federal initiative does not impose the Harlem paradigm on communities. Instead, it gives them flexible funding and a framework to align people, programs, and organizations across sectors in results-driven collaboratives aimed at ensuring all children in a target neighborhood succeed.
- <sup>20</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/11/26/critics-say-my-new-discipline-policy-is-unfair-to-white-students-heres-why-theyre-wrong/?utm\\_term=.87f8fd096eef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/11/26/critics-say-my-new-discipline-policy-is-unfair-to-white-students-heres-why-theyre-wrong/?utm_term=.87f8fd096eef)
- <sup>21</sup> <http://www.startribune.com/despite-minneapolis-moratorium-k-1-schoolkids-still-getting-suspended/330535511/>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/PNI-FINAL.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/san-franciscos-justice-system-gets-a-little-more-j>

[ust/2018/06/13/a4ca28a6-6f13-11e8-bf86-a2351b5ece99\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7d0d7bd8df6](ust/2018/06/13/a4ca28a6-6f13-11e8-bf86-a2351b5ece99_story.html?utm_term=.7d0d7bd8df6)  
2

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/07/21/2017-15359/applications-for-new-wards-promise-neighborhoods-program>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/overview/budget/budget17/summary/17summary.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/147066/flints-water-crisis-damage-kids-brains>

## Essay 4

Shifting from Technocratic to Democratic Solutions: A Radical Vision for Health and Racial Equity

***Authored by:***

**Anthony Iton**

**Senior Vice President, Programs & Partnerships, The California Endowment**

[Read a Q & A with author Anthony Iton.](#)



---

***Jump to:***

- [Health Disparities, Health Inequity, and Structural Racism](#)
  - [American Apartheid: The Undemocratic Underpinnings of Health Inequity](#)
  - [Policy Violence](#)
  - [Policy Reform Through Power Building](#)
  - [Building Healthy Communities' Framework and Theory of Change](#)
  - [Building Healthy Communities in Action](#)
  - [Lessons Learned](#)
  - [Looking Ahead](#)
-

COVID-19 emerged on the global scene in December 2019 and by the middle of 2021 had killed over 600,000 Americans.<sup>1</sup> So impactful was this virus that US overall life expectancy dropped by 1.5 years in 2020, the largest drop in life expectancy since World War II.<sup>2</sup> Alarmingly, the virus has behaved like a heat-seeking missile preying on socially vulnerable populations and rendering phenomenally disproportionate sickness, hospitalization, and death in communities already riddled with disadvantage and disparity.

COVID-19 disparities are profoundly racialized, with Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations experiencing a stunningly heavy burden of morbidity and mortality.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, COVID disparities drove a fall in life expectancy of 2.9 years for Black Americans and three years for Latinx Americans.<sup>4</sup> Such stark racial disparities in health outcomes in the U.S. are not new, yet no sustained progress has been made in reducing them during the past 25 years.<sup>5</sup> One reason is that American health disparities have been misdiagnosed as a *technocratic* problem—the product of inadequate health education and lack of access to health care—instead of what they really are: a *democratic* problem that is the product of long-standing and deeply rooted social injustice.

[The California Endowment](#) believes that the solution to a problem of democracy lies in dramatically enhancing the robustness of democratic processes, particularly at the local and regional levels. Since health disparities are driven by health inequities, which in turn are rooted in structural racism and carried out through largely undemocratic and non-participatory institutional practices and policies, we designed our Building Healthy Communities (BHC)



initiative to build political power in communities with low incomes so they could achieve the policy and systems reforms needed to create healthier and more equitable environments. In the example given in this essay (Fresno, CA) and 13 other places around the state, that is exactly what happened. To understand why a democratic approach to health and racial equity works better than a technocratic one, however, we first have to understand the relationship between health disparities, health inequity, and structural racism; how health inequity stems from a form of American apartheid; and how rules, regulations, and practices that promote this type of apartheid constitute a form of policy violence.

## Health Disparities, Health Inequity, and Structural Racism

Federal health authorities have only recently begun to acknowledge and explore the concept of health inequity to explain health disparities. Until now, the traditional “medical model” has focused at the micro level, trying to address specific diseases by improving health education and literacy and by intensifying medical services. However, geographic patterns of racial health disparities that appear at the macro level cannot be explained by micro-focused concepts of risk behaviors, access to health care, or genetics. These disparities are the result of health inequities that result from structural racism and racial segregation.

Differences in life expectancy rates are a prime example. Life expectancy between neighborhoods in American cities range wildly from one neighborhood to another,<sup>6</sup> often by 20 years or more. These gaping differences have been demonstrated across Oakland, Los Angeles, Seattle, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia,<sup>7,8,9,10,11,12,13</sup> and other places (see Fig. 1). (Similar correlations have been firmly established between the neighborhood in which one lives and outcomes for education, income, and crime exposure.<sup>14,15</sup>)

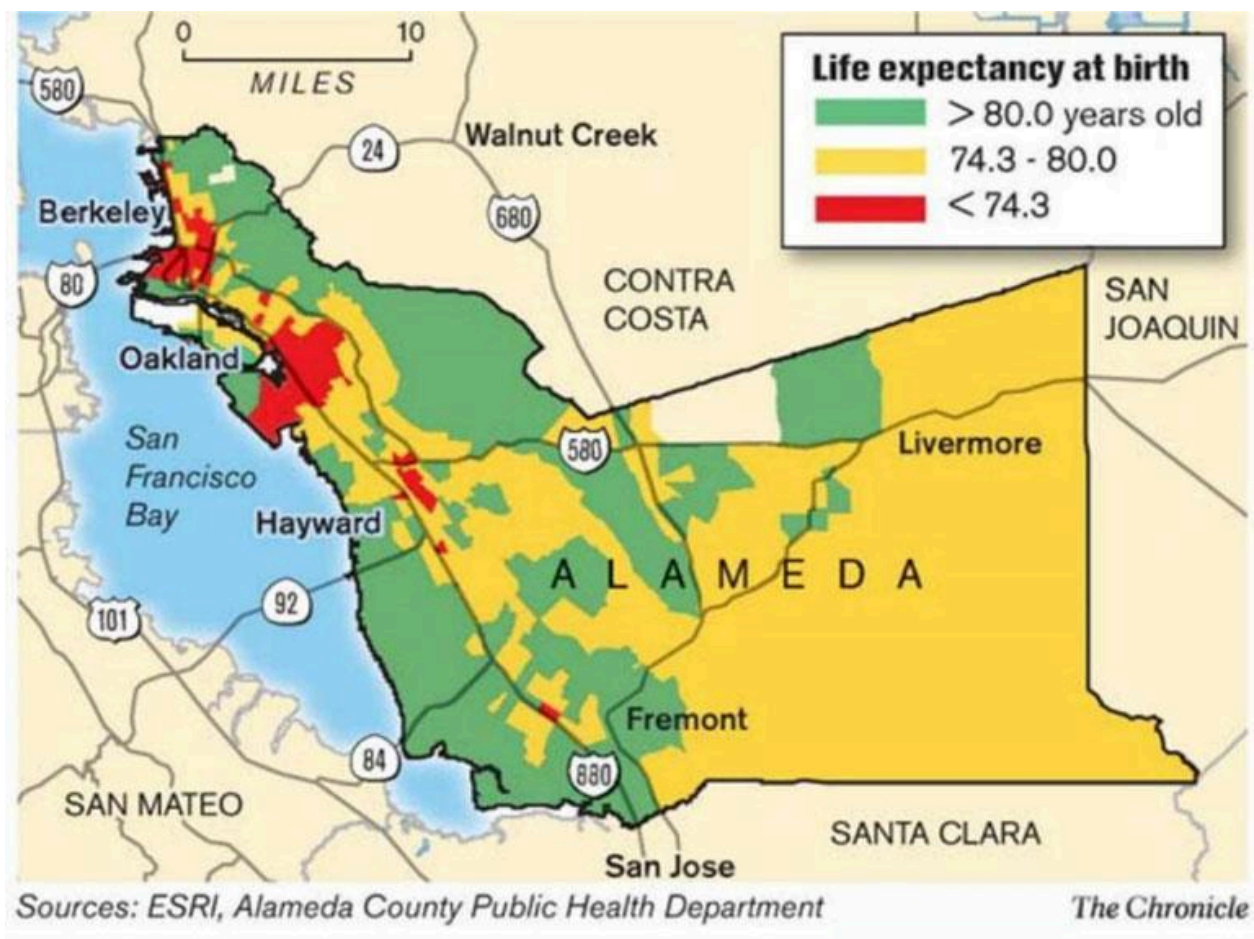


Figure 1: Alameda County California Life Expectancy By Census Tract

What makes it possible to predict the length of someone's life based on their address?<sup>16</sup> Scientific research reviews find that living in a poor neighborhood increases chronic stress, which changes one's physiology. People who have been consigned to live in neighborhoods that lack the basic resources needed for a healthy life have constant worries about many social and physical threats: impending utility shut offs or eviction, lack of medical care and paid leave when sick or injured, unemployment or inadequate wages, racism, fear of crime, fear of law enforcement, lack of educational or recreational opportunities for children, unsafe drinking water and air quality, and more. The social and environmental conditions in these neighborhoods incubate stress and manufacture disease, bathing residents in stress hormones 24/7—literally getting under their skin and changing how their bodies work.

The physiological changes caused by chronic stress contribute to well-documented higher levels of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and mental health disorders, communicable and chronic disease, infant mortality, and injury. Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) by Kaiser Permanente and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that exposure to intense, frequent, or sustained stress can change children's brains and bodies, including disrupting learning, behavior, immunity, growth, hormonal systems, immune systems, and even the way DNA is read and transcribed. Moreover, ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood. The increased burden of disease also causes more stress, which creates a vicious cycle.

#### American Apartheid: The Undemocratic Underpinnings of Health Inequity



The distribution of adverse experiences for children and toxic levels of chronic stress for adults is neither uniform nor unpredictable. Disproportionately, the Americans who live in neighborhoods that lack infrastructure, opportunity, and basic health-protective amenities, and experience the most chronic stress, are Black and/or Latinx.

Resource-deprived American neighborhoods are not a natural phenomenon; they are man-made. In the United States, the primary driving force that shapes the development of neighborhoods is racial segregation. In fact, it is accurate to say that America has a formidable system of apartheid that intentionally separates people by race in neighborhoods, schools, employment, and social and recreational institutions. The disproportionate concentration of Black Americans, in particular, in resource-deprived neighborhoods that are low income is the result of a constellation of longstanding federal, state, regional, and local policies of racial segregation designed to deny resources and opportunity to specific populations.

The United States' long-standing practice of withholding basic health-protective resources from populations that have a clearly discernible need is a form of state-mediated "policy violence."

### Policy Violence

Policy violence is the absence of affirmative policy in the face of abject need. It reflects a conscious choice—today, and in the past—to not take steps to fix inequities and, in fact, to allow them to continue and worsen.

As such decisions often do, policy violence inflicts a significant amount of unintended collateral damage. For example, American racism is not only causing health inequities that kill a disproportionate number of Black people and other people of color, it has put White American life expectancy into freefall. Consider these facts:

- In 1990, only 17 developed countries had longer life expectancies than that of U.S. Whites. Today, U.S. Whites die at younger ages than people in more than 30 other developed countries.
- During the past two decades, more than 500,000 Whites died prematurely in addition to the number of deaths we would normally anticipate based on expected death rates. These excess deaths occurred among people who lived primarily in rural communities and died of drug overdoses, alcohol-related causes, and suicide.
- Many of the excess deaths of White Americans could have been avoided by policies ensuring universal health care and more robust education and employment opportunities.

Given that health inequities are the byproduct of weak or racially discriminatory social policies in the present and overtly racist policies in the past, policy reform must be at the center of public health efforts to create health equity. The California Endowment (TCE)'s Building Healthy Communities (BHC) strategy illustrates the value of this approach.

### Policy Reform Through Power Building



Building Healthy Communities is based on TCE’s recognition that health inequity is fundamentally a failure of democracy and that robust, participatory democracy is good for health—particularly for communities that have been politically and socially oppressed and marginalized by racism and other forms of structural bias. We come to this recognition based on compelling data showing that when it comes to your health in the US, your Zip Code is more important than your genetic code.

By definition, policy reform requires political action. We define politics not in a partisan context but as the struggle over the allocation of limited and precious social resources that are necessary to protect health. Examples include simple amenities, like a park or grocery store in one’s neighborhood, and basic infrastructure, like sidewalks or pipes delivering potable water. These important social resources are explicitly allocated in political processes administered at the local, regional, state, and federal levels. In many California neighborhoods that have profound health disparities, however, many basic resources are absent.

If health is political and policy reform lies at the heart of creating health equity and improving population health, then it follows that power, particularly at the community level, is a critical variable in the design of intervention strategies. Thus, TCE’s proposed ‘upstream’ intervention to address health disparities was to build the social, economic, and political power of a critical mass of residents in these neighborhoods to foster greater influence and meaningful participation in local, regional, and state decision-making among those most impacted by health inequity. We sought to do this through an initiative we called Building Healthy Communities (BHC).

BHC was an holistic attempt to help revitalize local democracy by harnessing the latent power and potential of their residents to ensure that everyone has a chance to thrive. Specifically, BHC was a “place-conscious” initiative that aimed to help transform 14 communities with low incomes in 12 counties (comprising 66 percent of California’s population) through efforts to build community agency and create a strong sense of belonging, by changing the narrative from one of exclusion to inclusion, and enhance opportunity environments, by implementing proven health-protective policy.

## Building Healthy Communities' Framework and Theory of Change

The theory behind Building Healthy Communities was that we can improve community health by deliberately enhancing the political muscle of communities with low incomes so they could exert greater influence over health policy makers, systems, and institutions and hold those powers accountable for creating healthy and equitable community environments (see Fig. 2). In short, our approach was to foster participatory democracy, primarily through intensive community organizing, among the residents who had been excluded, stigmatized, discriminated against, and negatively impacted by health inequity.



Figure 2. Building Healthy Communities Theory of Change

Building Healthy communities is based on the Iton-Witt framework for health equity (Fig. 3), which integrates the medical model and the socio-ecological model by situating types of interventions along a continuum from upstream to downstream. The framework illustrates how upstream inequity at one end of the continuum leads to downstream disparity at the other end. For instance, a dominant discriminatory narrative (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, anti-immigrant bias) shapes institutional policies and practices that, in turn, create inequitable conditions and, consequently, poorer health for those who are the targets of that discriminatory narrative. In this way, the framework asserts that inequity is a product of the failure of democracy, rather than merely a technical problem that can be solved with individualized programs or services.

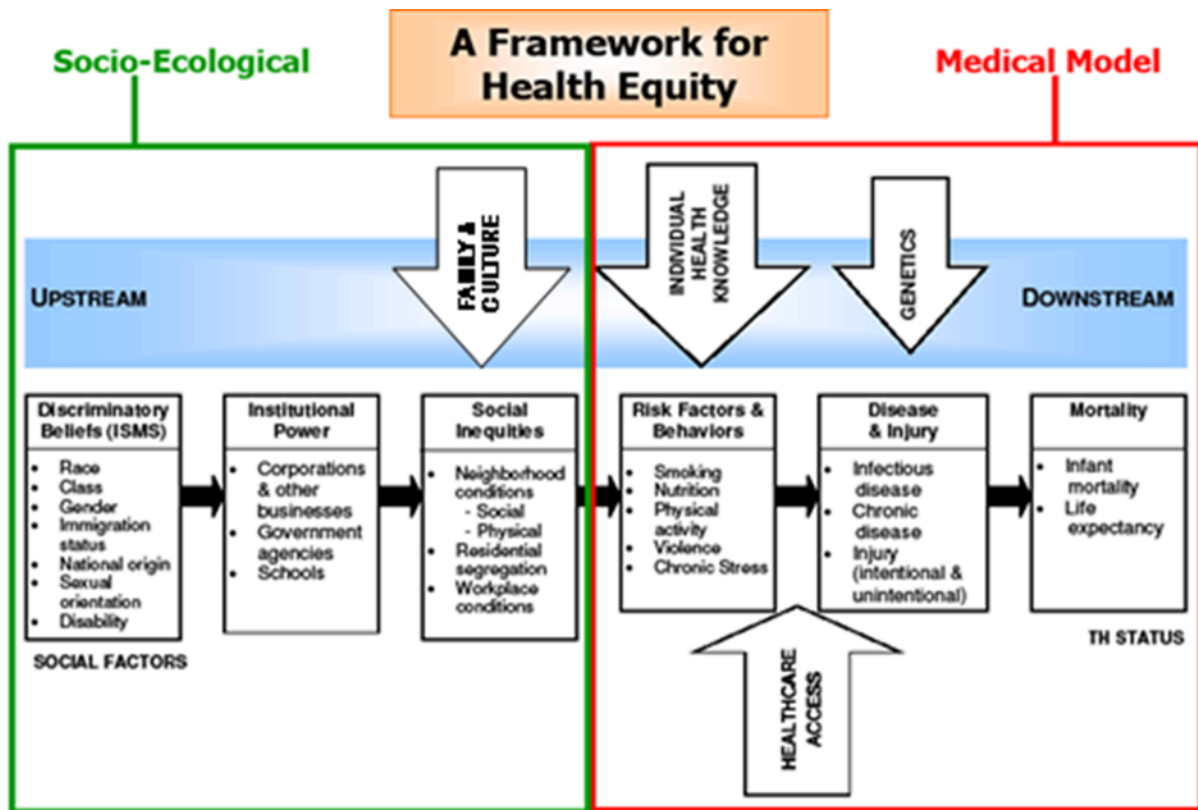


Figure 3. Iton-Witt Framework for Health Equity

### Building Healthy Communities in Action

Efforts by BHC collaborators in Fresno, CA, to get the city to invest in parks are a good example of policy reform through power building. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes substantial research findings that parks and trails can promote physical activity and community engagement, reduce injury and stress, foster community interaction, and provide environmental and mental health benefits. Unfortunately, many communities with low incomes have inadequate access to park space. In Los Angeles, for example, more than 2.6 million people live too far (more than one-fourth mile) from the nearest park to walk there—and Latinx, Black, and Asian American/Pacific Islander residents and residents with low incomes are less likely than wealthier and White residents to live near parks, playgrounds, and exercise facilities.<sup>17</sup>



As part of Building Healthy Communities, local community organizers canvassed historically redlined and disinvested Southwest Fresno neighborhoods and asked community residents the following question: “If you had all the money in the world, what would you change about your neighborhood?” Among the most cited responses were concerns about the dearth of parks and open space. This wasn’t surprising; between 2012-2015, Fresno scored worst in the nation on the Trust for Public Land’s annual index of how well the largest U.S. cities are meeting the need for parks. Thus was born the Fresno’s Parks4All campaign.

Campaign organizers brought together an alliance of Southwest Fresno residents that included Black, Latinx, Oaxacan Indigenous (speaking Mixteco and Zapotec), and Southeast Asian residents. In conversations with elected city leaders, adults and youth reiterated their desire for parks they could walk to, with green space and adequate lighting, to play and be physically active while staying safe and free from violence. Youth organizers then conducted a door-to-door survey of 406 peers, who reinforced the same desires.

Working with city leaders to update Fresno’s General Plan, organizers noted that North Fresno had 4.5 times more park acreage per resident than South Fresno. They designed a bus advertisement around this fact. But after initially agreeing to accept the bus ad, the city then reversed course and banned it on the grounds that it was “political.” The reversal caused a public uproar, with national media editorializing about the city’s hypocrisy. This attention helped Southwest Fresno community members win their first major victory, forcing the city to update and strengthen the parks and open space element of the General Plan with enforceable commitments to investments and maintenance.

Other victories followed:

- Community residents packed a budget hearing and won \$450,000 to create a Parks Master Plan for the city.
- The city committed to invest in a new skate park and a BMX bike track in South Fresno.

- Community advocacy for the creation of a Southwest Fresno-specific plan within the city's General Plan positioned the community to draw down up to \$70 million of the state's allocation to Fresno from the state's 2017 cap-and-trade funding.
- Parks4All organizing positioned Fresno to receive \$6.6 million to renovate a park in Calwa, an unincorporated and impoverished community in Fresno populated by many undocumented workers. Calwa Park had not been renovated since the 1950s.
- Young South Fresno residents gathered 12,000 signatures to put a local parks ballot measure before Fresno voters, designed to raise \$38 million annually for 30 years to invest in Fresno parks. "Measure P" was opposed by the mayor, police and fire chiefs, and Chamber of Commerce, but more than 60,000 Fresnans—representing 53% of the electorate—voted for it. When the city council refused to implement the measure, insisting that a two-thirds majority was required, community organizers raised money for a lawsuit that ultimately reached the California Supreme Court. The court sided with the local residents, and the ballot measure was certified into law. Over its 30-year duration, the measure is projected to raise over \$2 billion for Fresno parks.
- Community leaders of the Parks4all campaign are now actively consulted by the mayor, city council, state legislative leaders, and Chamber of Commerce on significant land use issues in Fresno.

Similar work occurred across California in 14 Building Healthy Communities sites and in state-level policy-making settings. Over 1,400 new policies, systems changes, and tangible benefits have been independently documented in the BHC communities and at the state level, including access to health insurance for 5 million Californians, full-scope health insurance coverage for hundreds of thousands of undocumented Californians, more than 400,000 fewer school suspensions, and profound changes for the formerly incarcerated.<sup>18</sup> Through these efforts, the community power generated by BHC achieved numerous health-protective policy changes that have laid the foundation for more equitable opportunity across California.

#### Lessons Learned

The resounding lessons of BHC can be summed up as Agency, Belonging, and Changed Conditions (ABC).

Agency is a concept in the public health literature that translates best as "control" or "power." The inequitable distribution of power is recognized as one of the structural drivers of inequities in the "conditions of daily life."<sup>19</sup> Early proponents of this concept hypothesized that the degree of control someone has over their life may be fundamental to health, in particular. BHC's emphasis on building community-level agency in order to address health inequity and its causes

has proved that assumption to be accurate and underscored the vital role that community agency can play in addressing policy violence.



Belonging or inclusion (sometimes also referred to as social capital or social cohesion) is a sense of being fully seen, heard, and considered as a person and a feeling that the culture, history, and contributions of the group to which one belongs are known and valued. Research findings on the links between belonging and health are substantial; they show that belonging is a primal emotion, fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being.<sup>20</sup> In TCE's work, the concept of belonging/inclusion is closely tied to identity groups, often based on racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation. Groups that are marginalized and stigmatized due to identity (e.g., undocumented, formerly incarcerated, boys and men of color, transgender) often are targets of punitive or exclusionary policies that diminish their health and well-being.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for example, the statewide Health4All campaign set out to foster a sense of belonging among California's undocumented population. A deliberate effort to change the narrative around undocumented Californians was at the heart of the Health4All campaign's success, which led to a series of profound policy changes including dramatic expansions of various county health programs for the uninsured and the unprecedented extension of full Medicaid coverage to all undocumented children and seniors in California

"Changed conditions" speaks to the fact that health is directly dependent on opportunities leveraged through key societal institutions, such as the health, education, land use, and criminal justice systems. Those systems are controlled through policy. Depending on the policy, systems and institutions can operate either as springboards to opportunity, helping young people and families develop their natural talents and skills, or they can impede and trap people with low incomes and push them toward dead-end outcomes such as unprevented illness, school dropout, unemployment, and incarceration. In many communities with low incomes, systems create conditions that diminish opportunity and make negative health outcomes more likely. By putting a priority on ensuring that these critical institutions create conditions that improve health rather than undermining it, Building Healthy Communities demonstrated the value of

linking community agency to system accountability in pursuit of health equity. This continues to be a core focus of TCE going forward.

### Looking Ahead

The California Endowment's experience has shown that addressing health disparities is not the zero-sum proposition suggested by the traditional medical model, which views the problem as individuals' failure to conform or adapt to the systems ostensibly created to help them. That technocratic or transactional approach assumes that the status quo is largely just and equitable, ignoring the structural drivers of inequity and, consequently, of health disparities.



Instead, Building Healthy Communities diagnoses health disparities as the product of structural—and largely racialized—inequity. The transformational approaches that BHC pursues focus on disrupting the power dynamics in communities so that the residents who are most impacted by inequity have the power and voice to hold key institutions accountable for more equitable and participatory policies, processes, and outcomes. Resetting the political equilibrium in this way has health benefits that spread throughout society.

Over the next decade, The California Endowment will continue to deepen its investment in strengthening the power-building infrastructure statewide to further optimize the success of local, regional, and statewide policies and systems in achieving health equity.

[Read a Q & A with author Anthony Iton.](#)

---

**To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us.](#)**

---

### Sources

<sup>1</sup> CDC COVID Data Tracker. <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>

<sup>2</sup> CDC National Center for Health

Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr015-508.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Hooper MW, Nápoles AM, Pérez-Stable EJ. COVID-19 and Racial/Ethnic Disparities. JAMA. 2020;323(24):2466-2467. doi: 10.1001/jama.2020.8598.

<sup>4</sup> CDC National Center for Health

Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr015-508.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Trends in Health Equity in the United States by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Income, 1993-2017  
Frederick J. Zimmerman, PhD; Nathaniel W. Anderson, BA. JAMA Network Open. 2019;2(6):e196386

<sup>6</sup> LIFE OR DEATH. Map: What story does your neighborhood's life expectancy

tell? <https://qz.com/1462111/map-what-story-does-your-neighborhoods-life-expectancy-tell/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.healthyalamedacounty.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=6401>

<sup>8</sup> [https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/TCE\\_APHA\\_2014\\_EZPres.pdf](https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/TCE_APHA_2014_EZPres.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.healthdata.org/research-analysis/library/variation-life-expectancy-and-mortality-cause-among-neighborhoods-king>

<sup>10</sup> <https://health.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/Baltimore%20City%20Life%20Expectancy%20by%20CSA,%202011-2015.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://las.depaul.edu/centers-and-institutes/chaddick-institute-for-metropolitan-development/news-and-events/Documents/FinalChaddick%20Presentation%20-%20060617JS.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cleveland.com/healthfit/2018/12/where-you-live-determines-how-long-you-live.html>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.phila.gov/documents/close-to-home-the-health-of-philadelphias-neighborhoods/?mc\\_cid=b2a0efbb93&mc\\_eid=1197d87fe6](https://www.phila.gov/documents/close-to-home-the-health-of-philadelphias-neighborhoods/?mc_cid=b2a0efbb93&mc_eid=1197d87fe6)

<sup>14</sup> Neighborhoods and Health. Issue Brief # 8. May 2011. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Commission to Build a Healthier

America. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/insights/our-research/2011/05/housing-and-health.html>

<sup>15</sup> The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects.

Chetty R., Hendren N., Quarterly Journal of Economics, 133(3): 1107-1162,

2018 <https://www.opportunityatlas.org/>

<sup>16</sup> Life Expectancy

Calculator. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/whereyouliveaffectshowlongyoulive.html>

<sup>17</sup> Trust for Public Land.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources\\_2021.pdf](https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources_2021.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/enhanced-wellbeing/first-global-conference>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources\\_2021.pdf](https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources_2021.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources\\_2021.pdf](https://www.calendow.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TCE-Annotated-Bibliography-of-Major-BHC-Resources_2021.pdf)

## Essay 5

Mobilizing Youth Movements to Achieve Equitable Outcomes for Children, Families, and Communities at Scale

***Authored by:***

**Austin Thompson**

**former Executive Director of the Youth Engagement Fund (YEF)**

[Read a Q & A with author Austin Thompson.](#)



---

***Jump to:***

- [Lessons about Mobilizing Youth Movements](#)
- [Looking to the Future](#)

---

Our country is on a downward spiral in terms of worsening and more unequal outcomes for far too many children, families, and communities unless people come together and create movements for change—movements built of, by, and around younger generations of activists and organizers.



Demographically, by 2021<sup>1</sup> a majority of youth in the United States, ages 18 and younger, will be non-White: Black, Indigenous or of other nationalities. Simultaneously, we see a rapidly aging population of Americans that matches the traditional majority-White status of the U.S. as we've come to know it. Why do these two contrasting demographic trends matter? Because in the U.S., policy priorities often diverge along racial and age lines but policies passed in many fast-changing states appear to be tilted heavily in favor of older, Whiter constituents.

The activism of youth and young adults—those between the ages of 16 and their mid-20s—matter to this country's policy future, for many reasons. First, what young people are experiencing now will shape their worldview and civic actions for years to come. Events that happen around the age of 18 have a major impact on people's future outlook and behavior.<sup>2</sup> Young people today are making their transition to adulthood at a catalytic moment, amidst sweeping events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice reckoning, rising inequality, and technological challenges. They—and, as a result, our nation—will be forever shaped by those experiences.

Second, young people bring passion, fresh perspectives, and expertise to causes. Today's youth are eager to change the status quo on a grand scale. Youth activism as a driver for movement-building captured the national imagination in February 2018 following the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida; young people from across the country marched in Washington, DC to protest the national epidemic of gun violence. In 2019, immigrant youth mobilized against children being separated from their parents and detained at the U.S./Mexican border. In 2020, young people were a major force in protesting George Floyd's murder and in the resurgence of the Movement for Black Lives that followed.

Third, young people have demonstrated power at the polls. As voters and volunteers, young racial minorities and a sizable number of White youth were decisive drivers of the social movement that swept the first African-American president into the White House in 2008. (The power of that diverse youth movement was subsequently outmatched by an older and less-diverse movement that, since 2010, has captured state governments across the country,

leaving a path of devastated vulnerable communities in its wake). And the power of the young electorate continues to grow. Millennials and part of Generation Z—roughly ages 18-40—now make up the largest share of the U.S. electorate. A significant number of this cohort are digitally savvy, networked, and “connected from birth,” retrieving and sharing information in vastly different ways than the generations preceding theirs. These younger generations share egalitarian values but also are deeply skeptical of our institutions and lawmakers. Their voting patterns and behavior will be influential for decades to come.

Finally, youth are driving a shift in power toward voters of color. The proportion of eligible voters who are White, with no college degree, dropped between 2016 and 2020 from 46 to 43 percent.<sup>3</sup> This shift was driven not by immigration but by the growing proportion of young people of color turning 18. No other event in the coming decade has the potential to rebalance the divisive racial politics of the past than the explosive growth in voting-aged young people: Black, Indigenous and other people of color.



It is a mistake, however, to talk about young people as a singular, disconnected constituency, as if we were saying, “This is only about young people.” The “youth question” really is a broader question about the social safety net and how it must be reconstructed given demographic changes. Youth matter because of their own needs, but also because of their relationship with the nation’s aging population. The shifting population balance and the diversity explosion make it critical to structure a social safety net that meets the needs of a rising, youthful, mainly of-color generation.

This essay’s premise is that youth activism and youth-driven movements are essential drivers toward a bright, equitable future for youth themselves and for all Americans. With that goal, I offer the following lessons and examples of what it takes to jumpstart and mobilize youth movements that can work to achieve more equitable results for children, families, and communities, and to build public will around the effort.

Lessons about Mobilizing Youth Movements

***Boldly promote a vision of racial equity and justice***

For decades, racial divides have defined the politics of social welfare for children and families—a politics which, for a moment in 2008, seemed to be turning around. Working people of all races have benefited from government action to help the most vulnerable communities, but, thanks to a campaign of fear and racial dog-whistling, a majority of White voters have consistently supported politicians who fight efforts to strengthen these progressive social policies.<sup>4</sup>

Building and sustaining diverse movements to expand the electorate in states will predictably raise the ugly head of racism. From the separation of immigrant families at the border to the acceleration of anti-Black and anti-Arab rhetoric, racism that was once hidden has now erupted into plain view. There is nothing new about politicians using strategic racism to rally support behind agendas that ultimately harm communities of every racial or ethnic background, but today the stakes are much higher. Recent census data show that, for the first time, every age cohort between birth and age nine in the United States includes more “minority” than White children.<sup>5</sup> Around the world, racial diversity—either native-born or through immigration—has triggered a surge in overt White nationalism and explicitly White supremacist online conspiracy theories.

Campaigns to deepen civic engagement at the state level will falter without a bold and ambitious vision of racial justice that directly confronts strategic racism. Demos, a New York-based thinktank, recently unveiled detailed messaging research on how to talk about race and racism in ways that can win a better future for people of all races without avoiding the problem of racism or acknowledging racial differences.<sup>6</sup> The idea that building a wider movement requires ambivalence toward issues of race and racism is one that young organizers are ferociously opposing at the state level, and other advocates should follow their direction.

### ***Connect state-level issue advocacy with broader democratic engagement***



Young activists often grow frustrated with the slow pace of progress in our civic and democratic processes, which in many cases don't feel very democratic. But movement-building today requires patient, place-based organizing on a state-by-state basis. This is because, since the founding of the United States, opposition to racial

and economic equality and to environmental protections has focused at the state level, often waving the banner of states' rights. Unsurprisingly, the states with the deepest statewide racial disparities in education, health care, voting access, and environmental pollution are represented by elected officials who militantly oppose federal action to close them. Yet these states, largely in the Southeast and Southwest, are the most fertile for long-term transformation of political power because the amount of suffering there is so raw.

There is a sizable gap between youthful issue-oriented activism (largely centered in coastal urban areas) and state-level civic engagement. Closing that gap requires some substantial shifts in the way youth organizing has been characterized and understood in the past. The key is to break out of old patterns of thinking about the wall between issue advocacy and democratic engagement. Policy advocates, organizers, and local community groups mobilizing voters share the same objectives. We have often been too nervous to work together, but going forward the essential work of movement building, apart from any specific set of demands or policy, must be to connect people, ideas, and resources across these divides.

Whereas previous attempts to build cross-movement solidarity have stalled—perhaps because they lacked concrete objectives to inspire and hold people together—integrated voter engagement efforts provide a focused and sustainable opportunity for groups to collaborate. These programs include year-round organizing, voter registration, and holistic, nonpartisan get-out-the-vote efforts that also involve issue advocacy. We see youth-focused efforts using these techniques successfully in California, New Mexico, and other Southern/Southwestern states where youth-focused organizations are conducting integrated voter engagement in high schools, community colleges, and public universities with an emphasis on young women and young people of color. In Texas, for example, a youth organization called Jolt used integrated social media campaigns focused on Latinx culture, pride, and voter education to increase voter participation among high school students. In Colorado, where 16- and 17-year-olds can pre-register to vote and schools compete for voter registration awards, 63 percent of young people voted in the 2020 presidential election<sup>7</sup>—well above the average for young voters nationwide (approximately 55 percent).<sup>8</sup>

***Convert passive recipients of social services into active champions of structural change***



Movements have three layers: leadership, activism, and general public support. Effective social movements that shake the earth operate at all three layers. Most advocacy and civic engagement efforts, however, work mainly to mobilize leaders and activists, and they reach general supporters only lightly. Today's leaders and activists must do a better job of engaging that third layer.

The best way to do this is to use the process of receiving services and benefits—and, particularly, unnecessary barriers—as a mobilizing tool. As unemployment reaches record heights during and following the pandemic and the lines of people trying to get food and essential services grow, we need to simultaneously engage folks in a conversation about what real, deep structural reform could mean—for example, how they wouldn't have to wait in line for benefits to which they're entitled, or how administrative burdens of simply getting an unemployment check would go away. We have to connect a vision of change to direct benefits, particularly now when our social safety net, which already had many holes and leakages, is under extreme strain and pressure. This is a real opportunity for movement building with broad general support.

### ***Foster intergenerational and multigenerational learning***

All movements must be intergenerational and multigenerational, and not just with the generations that are living. Movements must include our ancestors, and they must include future generations. This means that we must organize movements in ways that draw from our ancestors and their wisdom. For instance, 1918 might seem like a long time ago until we get hit with something like COVID-19 and realize that the playbook for how to deal with it comes from effective responses to the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic. The insights of veterans who have been in the struggle a long time are crucial.

When generational rifts break down, we see the greatest spark of change in a movement. Ella Baker played this cross-generational role in the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She learned most of her organizing skills during the Great Depression of the 1930s and 40s. Then, in the 1960s, she saw young people come together in

North Carolina and form the SNCC, and she shared with them what she knew. The SNCC veterans who are now 70, 80 years old still say, “Miss Baker taught us this.”

*How* this intergenerational transfer of wisdom matters, too. Part of what made Ella Baker’s guidance to the young creators of SNCC so valuable was that she didn’t come at them trying to “teach” something. She used the Socratic method of engaging people in questions and dialogue as a way to interrogate assumptions, overcome differences, and change beliefs. Myles Horton, co-founder of the Highlander Folk School,<sup>9</sup> also used this dialectical approach in workshops for SNCC’s founders and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. That type of process for helping people synthesize the best insights about movement building and organizing—without allowing different vantage points to become antagonizing, especially between generations—is largely missing today, but sorely needed. Dialogue helps to overcome some of the stridency that young (or older) people can have, because the conversation becomes about growing and learning rather than about one side’s point of view opposing another. And in that process we can take what works from the past and apply it going forward.

Future generations also need to be part of what we do. We need to think about how to organize our economy, our food system, our health care system, and our education system in a way that benefits new generations 100 years from now.

### ***Forge connections across sectors and cultures***



Young people in social justice struggles must learn to work in coalition with other players from the business, government, and philanthropic and nonprofit sectors to maximize resources and expand their reach within states. By partnering with other organizers and organizations, they can leverage scarce resources such as office space or grant funding for programmatic work. For instance, many states have state-level civic engagement tables that receive national funds from donors to “coordinate” local civic engagement activity. Most of these state tables acknowledge that youth engagement is a critical missing piece of the infrastructure and are willing to forge partnerships with youth-led social change organizations.

Forging sustained relationships between individuals and institutions that represent different sectors and strategies for change is crucial for changing the electorate in states. There are cultural differences among the sectors, however, and overcoming them is a key task for young movement leaders. For example, civic organizations tend to operate in a metrics-driven environment, while social justice organizations are relationship-based. Legacy organizations and institutions often become stagnant and rigid, rewarding job seniority and acquired expertise over fresh new insights. At the other extreme, some youthful organizations and institutions insist that “only the kids will save us” and cut themselves off from intergenerational wisdom that could be gained from organizers of past wins. Both of these extremes represent a core strategic challenge for successful efforts at converting millions of potential young voters into new voters.

### ***Frame issues in ways that broaden their appeal to a wider audience***

To shape the larger public conversation, young activists can and must learn to talk about their struggles for racial and gender justice in ways that excite supporters, persuade the middle, and neutralize the opposition. In New Mexico, a reproductive justice organization called Young Women United (YWU) has done this successfully. In 2017, YWU and another organization conducted surveys and focus groups in rural parts of the state and found that 77 percent of New Mexicans agreed with the statement, “I can hold my own moral views on abortion and still trust a woman and her family to make this decision for themselves,” and another 74 percent agreed that “Personal decisions about abortion need to remain with New Mexican women, their families, and their medical providers.”<sup>10</sup> YWU used this research to defeat several attempts to undermine reproductive and family health in a state with a large Catholic population.

Messages shouldn’t just be aimed at people who already support a particular perspective. In civic engagement, the goal is to build as wide a movement as possible in order to create consensus for the issues at hand. YWU’s organizing work to build broad support for reproductive justice provides a powerful example of how young activists can win widespread support for seemingly “radical” ideas.

### ***Don’t ignore rural areas***

Youth organizing originated in large urban centers, and while urban areas do attract large numbers of young people, to have an impact on the electorate it is important to expand reach into less densely populated rural areas, too. A common misconception is that “rural” is synonymous with old and White, a myth perpetuated by the media, but nothing could be farther from the truth. In many Southern and Southwestern states, key drivers of the state economy are located in rural and agricultural areas, and communities of color cluster around

these regions in search of economic opportunity. Young people of color who attend schools in these regions deserve to be part of broader movements for change.



Rural areas often are the most harshly affected by cuts to state services, the criminalization of poverty, and attacks on reproductive and family health. They also happen to be places that provide a bulwark for ultra-conservative state governing power. In New Mexico, many local organizers talk about the lack of infrastructure and support for organizing in the southern part of the state, which has the state's deepest levels of poverty and anti-immigrant racial profiling but few organizations that might change this situation. A key ask of funders has been to support efforts to expand the reach of youth activism into these areas.

***Provide sustained funding to address the underlying causes of social inequity***

No matter how inspired the effort, movement building without sufficient financial resources is not sustainable. Even after the prolific start of the Movement for Black Lives, in which thousands of activists took to the streets in waves, many of the most important leaders were left without much material support. As the New York Times reported on young protesters who participated in the marches and demonstrations against police brutality and violence after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri: "Along with the long hours, constant confrontation and frequent heartbreak they experience, activists work for little or no pay and sometimes struggle for basic needs like food and shelter even as they push for societal change."<sup>11</sup>

Funding for civic engagement can be an important source of financial sustainability for young organizers looking for ways to continue their activism without living in poverty; in fact, field canvassing operations in rural areas of states often provide young people with their first steady job. But most funders only provide short-term, episodic support (e.g., election-specific or crisis-response grants) rather than supporting efforts to address the failures of the social safety net or imbalances around race and equity in our society. Institutions such as university centers or prominent NGOs may temporarily support the role of young activists in confronting

entrenched power, but they are less keen to provide grants or other support when the media attention wanes.

Institutions, advocates, and funders must work more intentionally to find creative, long-term ways to help finance and support courageous young field organizers on the front lines of the struggle for inclusive democracy. This means providing long-term support for movement-oriented efforts to build power among those who lack it and to fix the systems that reproduce disparities—not just funding for programmatic efforts that soften the blow of immediate crises (as important as those may be).

An important first step would be to increase the availability of paid fellowships and scholarships for young people in vulnerable communities. For example, the Youth Engagement Fund (YEF), which I founded at NEO Philanthropy, raises money for civic participation by racially diverse populations of young people (ages 16-29) in New Mexico, Arizona, Georgia, Texas, Florida, North Carolina, and other states. Seventy-five percent of local community groups that received our support state that funding from the YEF was essential to help build the capacity of their organization and expand the reach of their work into rural areas.

#### Looking to the Future

The next decade will see several major dilemmas for youth movement building and organizing. Just two of the most critical are:

- **A mismatch between social media-driven protest and traditional power politics.** The fresh experiences and energy of young people can be at odds with the need to engage with a political system that has slogged along for two and a half centuries without many significant structural changes. Can the youthful energy of national mobilizations be transferred into efforts to change the political climate in states across the country—a realm that, unlike the globalized internet, is divided into local districts, counties, and cities, each of which has long-standing political organizations adept at maintaining and manipulating power?
- **Tension between short-term mobilizing and long-term organizing.** Faced with the prospect of a dystopian future of mass shootings, ecological collapse, and debt, young people will likely take to the streets with increasing frequency. But youth-led mobilizations should not be confused with the often-tedious and certainly time-consuming work of building a long-term movement for change—that is to say, a movement that inspires millions of people to participate civically at the local level. I have witnessed this very tension play out through the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's Legacy Project, which was established to celebrate the SNCC's contributions to the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and to share lessons with current

activists. In a heated debate between former members of SNCC and young activists from the immigrant youth movement, the Movement for Black Lives, and Occupy, the generations sometimes appeared to be on opposite sides of shared issues—even on the importance of voting.



These dilemmas are obstacles but not insurmountable barriers. The challenge before us is to translate the ferocious youth activism that has made a difference on issue after issue during the past five years (and indeed for decades before that) into a cross-issue, cross-racial, and cross-generational movement, with the leadership and infrastructure to sustain itself, grow, and advocate for systemic change at scale.

If we fail to do this, the stakes could not be higher. At the time of this writing, the majority of state legislatures and the judiciary are controlled by individuals with an expressed vitriol toward the policy agenda to which Harold Richman and others devoted their lives. Given that, young people concerned with racial and gender equity, a stronger and fairer social safety net, equal justice, and a clean environment must see civic participation as a necessary strategy for changing the odds. They must see the role that they, as emerging leaders, can play in rebalancing power to secure change at scale. In short, they must see the solution, see themselves in the solution, and organize and be civically engaged to make the solution real.

[Read a Q & A with author Austin Thompson.](#)

---

**To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us.](#)**

---

### **Sources**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau estimate, updated February 2020, p. 4., <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Giuliano, P. and Spilimbergo, A. (November 2015). “Growing up in a

Recession: Beliefs and the Macroeconomy.” Working Paper 15321, National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w15321>.

<sup>3</sup> Griffin, R., Frey, W.H., and Teixeira, R. (October 19, 2020). “America’s Electoral Future: The Coming Generational Transformation.” Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/politics-and-elections/reports/2020/10/19/491870/americas-electoral-future-3/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lopez, I.H. (December, 2015). Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Frey, W.H. (June 22, 2018). “U.S. White Population Declines and Generation ‘Z-Plus’ is Minority White, Census Shows.” Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/06/21/us-white-population-declines-and-generation-z-plus-is-minority-white-census-shows/>.

<sup>6</sup> Race-Class Narrative Project, Demos. <https://www.demos.org/campaign/race-class-narrative-project>.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (March 23, 2021). “State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: West and Southwest.” Tufts Tisch College, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-2020-youth-voter-turnout-west-and-southwest>.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (March 23, 2021). “State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: West and Southwest.” Tufts Tisch College, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/election-week-2020#youth-voter-turnout-increased-in-2020>.

<sup>9</sup> Now the Highlander Research and Education Center.

<sup>10</sup> <https://forwardtogether.org/tools/the-road-to-reproductive-justice/>

<sup>11</sup> Eligon, J. (March 26, 2018). “They Push. They Protest. And Many Activists, Privately, Suffer as a Result.” The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/us/they-push-they-protest-and-many-activists-privately-suffer-as-a-result.html>.

## Essay 6

### **Balancing Adversity with HOPE: Reshaping Policies and Systems Around Positive Childhood Experiences**

*Authored by:*

**Robert Sege**

**Pediatrician, the Floating Hospital for Children at Tufts Medical Center**

**Professor of Medicine, Tufts University School of Medicine**

*Read a Q & A with author Robert Sege.*



---

*Jump to:*

- [The Science of Positive Experiences](#)
  - [Moving from Science to Practices, Policies, and Systems](#)
  - [HOPE, Equity, and Racism](#)
  - [Moving Forward: Opportunities and Implications for Action](#)
  - [Sources](#)
-

Knowledge of how early experiences shape children's development and, consequently, their life outcomes has improved dramatically in the past two decades, driven by new discoveries in neuroscience. We now understand better than ever before how human brains grow and change in response to positive and adverse experiences; what experiences, environments, and opportunities children need in order to thrive; and how to incorporate scientific findings into child- and family-supportive services and supports.

Up until now, researchers and practitioners who work with children and families have focused primarily on how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) determine later outcomes. The powerful science surrounding ACEs began to emerge in 1998<sup>1</sup> and has had a significant influence on research, policy, and practice ever since.

However, a newer and rapidly growing science surrounding positive childhood experiences (PCEs) now makes it possible to attend to PCEs and their lifelong effects on health and well-being. It is crucial to rebalance our focus to include positive child experiences and to identify the changes in mindsets, narratives, professional training, and in policy, services, systems, and communities needed to allow knowledge from this new science to make a positive difference in young children's lives and futures. Reshaping policies and systems to integrate the science of positive childhood experiences is a powerful strategy for achieving more equitable life outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

“Reshaping policies and systems to integrate the science of positive childhood experiences is a powerful strategy for achieving more equitable life outcomes for vulnerable children and families.”

This essay reviews scientific research and epidemiological findings that support the role of positive experiences; places the health effects of positive childhood experiences in the context of what we know about strong families and communities; and puts forward ideas for how child- and family- serving practices and policies can support these fundamental requirements for optimal development .

### The Science of Positive Experiences

Advances in brain imaging allow detailed assessment of brain structure and function, opening up dramatic new insights into brain development, damage, and healing. CT scans allow the careful quantitative assessment of the size and shape of key brain structures. MRI techniques, which do not expose subjects to radiation, add the ability to assess and localize brain activity when subjects perform specific tasks. Improvements in signal analysis now allow detailed localization of brain electrical activity. These technologies have confirmed that human brains grow and develop in response to experiences, both negative and positive.

Research on adverse childhood experiences. In the late 20th century, the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE study) demonstrated the health consequences of child abuse, family dissolution, and other events that undermined a child's sense of security.<sup>2,3</sup> The biological basis by which chronic, unmitigated stress leads to changes in childhood brain development has been linked to changes in the hypothalamic-pituitary axis. Stress leads to increases in cortisol and related stress hormones. Transient increases in these hormones result in the fight or flight reflex—increasing vigilance, blood supply to skeletal muscles, and heart rates, all of which prepare us to defend against external threats. Chronic stress, however, leads to continued high levels of cortisol. Dr. Jack Shonkoff and colleagues at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child coined the term toxic stress to describe the mechanism linking the experience of severe and unmitigated stress to changes in brain development.<sup>4,5</sup>

The ACE study and similar work that followed gave rise to new understandings of the relationship between traumatic experience, early brain development, behavior, and lifelong health. Trauma-informed care leveraged those new insights into more effective approaches to mental and physical healing. Current understandings of human development build on this earlier understanding of the relationship between childhood experience, child development, and brain growth. Although this science is certainly not the only basis for understanding, it validates the importance of a new overall framework to guide policy and practice.

Research on positive childhood experiences. A more recent, parallel body of research provides the basis for understanding brain and body chemistry related to positive experiences. The hormone oxytocin, which affects brain function and physiology, appears to be associated with the formation of warm, positive relationships. Oxytocin has dramatic effects on pregnant women and mothers: Its release facilitates uterine contractions during labor and supports lactation after birth. Recent research also has noted oxytocin release in new fathers and mothers, and synchronized release among close partners.<sup>6</sup> Oxytocin plays an important part in forming attachment between children and parents as they interact, from infancy throughout early childhood.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneous releases of oxytocin also can occur when people have other positive experiences, such as when they are falling in love or participating in group spiritual activities.

This understanding leads to an important new insight: In a child's development, positive experiences (operating via the effects of oxytocin) may have an impact analogous to that of cortisol. Experiences that involve positive family and community relationships can lead to chronic or repeated increases in oxytocin, which can produce salutary changes in the growing child's brain and immune system.<sup>8</sup>

“Research has demonstrated the protective or healing effects of positive childhood experiences, [which]... can produce salutary changes in the growing child's brain and immune system.”

Human brains constantly change in response to experiences, environmental changes, and trauma and disease. Positive experiences, like adverse ones, lead to measurable changes in brain anatomy and function. For example, intensive therapy after brain damage from a stroke results in the recruitment of new areas of the brain to take over functions previously performed by the damaged region.<sup>9</sup> Learning to meditate results in changes in internal connections and resting brain activity.<sup>10</sup> Learning to read results in observable increases in brain pathways between the visual cortex and regions responsible for speech.<sup>11,12</sup> Moreover, brain changes after a psychological trauma accompany post-traumatic recovery; in observations conducted in Japan following a devastating earthquake, survivors who experienced post-traumatic psychological recovery also had observable post-traumatic brain growth.<sup>13</sup>

These findings run counter to prior beliefs that adverse childhood experiences lead inexorably to deleterious changes in brain architecture. Research<sup>14</sup> has demonstrated the protective or healing effects of positive childhood experiences.<sup>15</sup> As shown in the figure below, adapted from Bethell et al., 2019, individuals who recalled positive childhood experiences were dramatically less likely to suffer from depression or poor mental health as adults (Fig. 1). The results were even more striking among those who recalled four or more types of adverse childhood experiences. They showed remarkable resilience if they also recalled positive childhood experiences: The prevalence of depression or poor mental health fell from 60 percent in those with 4 or more ACEs and 0-2 types of positive childhood experiences to 21 percent among those with the same number of adverse childhood experiences but also 6-7 positive childhood experiences (out of 7 possible types), shown in Fig. 2.

Christina Bethell has expanded the research on individuals to also demonstrate links between child, parent, and family well-being related to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes.

Figure 1:

## Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) Protect Adult Mental Health

- 6-7 vs. 0-2 PCEs: 72% lower odds of depression or poor mental health
- 3-5 PCEs v 0-2 PCEs: 52% lower odds of depression or poor mental health
- 48% v. 12.6%, OR 0.28; 95% CI 0.24-0.39. 3.8x higher rate for 0-2 vs. 6-7 PCEs.

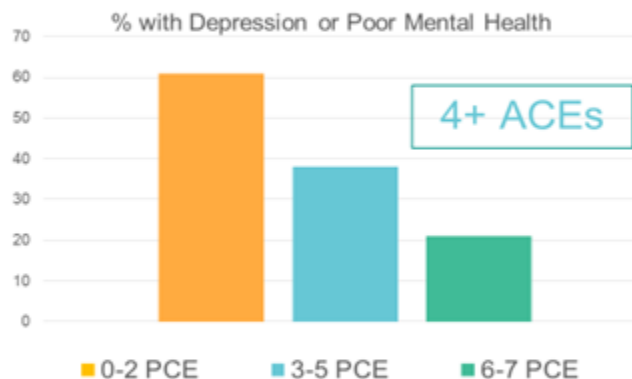


Bethell C, Jones J, Gombojav N, Linkenbach J, Sege R. Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019 Sep 9; e193007



Figure 2:

## Positive Childhood Experiences Mitigate ACEs Effects



Bethell C, Jones J, Gombojav N, Linkenbach J, Sege R. Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019 Sep 9; e193007



### Moving from Science to Practices, Policies, and Systems

Scientific findings on positive childhood experiences suggest that many practices, policies, and systems should be reshaped so they are better able to generate and support PCEs. Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) is a framework for systematically applying the

science to practices, policies, and systems to improve children’s and families’ health and well-being. We now see it being used successfully in many places and settings across the United States.

The HOPE framework. The HOPE framework uses recent developments in brain science and imaging to produce a concise, actionable framework for developing effective approaches to family support that begin with the identification, celebration, and promotion of positive childhood experiences. This approach flips the current standard, in which providers and programs base their work on identifying problems and referring families for professional services.

HOPE’s premise is simple: A history of adversity is not destiny. Positive and negative factors appear in all domains of a child’s social ecology, and positive childhood experiences can mitigate or supersede adverse experiences’ impact on child and adult health by blocking the development of toxic stress and by providing experiences that promote healing and recovery. This starting point aligns with the “Science of the Positive” approach developed by the Montana Institute,<sup>16</sup> which focuses on growing the healthy, positive, protective factors that already exist in communities<sup>17</sup> and embedding support for safe, stable, nurturing relationships in a community’s culture.<sup>18</sup>

“HOPE’s premise is simple: A history of adversity is not destiny”

HOPE’s focus on positive childhood experiences emphasizes the important underpinnings of love, family, and community support that allow many people to thrive even in the face of systemic inequality and other adversities. HOPE’s framework and approach are based on research that reveals four building blocks of early positive experiences that can have lifelong effects:<sup>19</sup>

1. Being in nurturing supportive relationships;
2. Living, playing, and learning in safe, stable, protective, and equitable environments;
3. Engaging in constructive social and civic activities that develop a sense of connection; and
4. Developing social and emotional competence.

These building blocks describe broad types of experiences that children need, but HOPE gives families and communities flexibility to choose which specific PCEs are most important for them to focus on.

The HOPE framework builds on decades of efforts to reframe commonly used and well-understood risk-based frameworks, which focus on a child’s experiences of abuse, neglect,

and family disruption, by developing and spreading the use of strengths-based approaches. This strategic shift encourages providers to follow a three-step process: identify families' strengths; honor them and celebrate successes; and, building from that basis, promote further positive experiences.

Strength-based approaches are not new; many societies and cultures around the world have developed elaborate communal experiences and traditional practices, some tracing back through millennia, to promote positive family experiences and social connections. These include rituals to celebrate the arrival of a new baby—ranging from baptism in the Christian Catholic tradition to Namakarana, the Hindu name-giving ceremony—by bringing the community together to provide a safe and welcoming environment for the child and family. What HOPE adds is the lens of childhood experience to knit these approaches and ideas into a common framework.

Applying the HOPE framework. Programs and systems are already applying approaches to PCEs in ways that illustrate the impact such an overarching framework can have. For example:

- To ensure that infants are raised in safe and secure environments (one of HOPE's building blocks), Family Connects identifies gaps in the resources supporting parents of newborns and connects the families to community-based resources.
- To support the development of positive foundational relationships between caregivers and young children (another one of HOPE's building blocks), Reach Out and Read integrates reading into pediatric practices, where practitioners advise families about the importance of reading together and share books that are pivotal for healthy childhood development.
- Systems and professionals involved in child welfare, child abuse prevention, and early childhood education have adopted the Strengthening Families approach and protective factors framework<sup>20</sup> of family characteristics/assets that support positive childhood experiences<sup>21</sup> and reduce adolescent risks.<sup>21</sup> In addition to applying the framework at scale, child welfare and early childhood systems have adopted the framework to leverage change system-wide.<sup>22</sup> HOPE was developed, in part, to understand the effects of strong families on childhood experiences to build on how the Strengthening Families approach has improved child welfare practices around the United States.
- [DULCE](#) (Developmental Understanding and Legal Collaboration for Everyone) is an evidence-based program that operates across child- and family-serving sectors to support infants and their families by creating multi-sector care teams that meet families during their infant routine healthcare visits.<sup>23,24</sup> DULCE uses a way of interacting and communicating that embodies the core values of strong family relationships, safe and

equitable environments, and opportunities for parent engagement. Ninety percent of eligible families who were introduced to DULCE completed the intervention; virtually all were screened for health-related social needs, and the majority of those who screened positive received resources. This approach dramatically improved access to safe and equitable environments for infants and their families.

- *A Roadmap to Resilience*, published by the California Office of the Surgeon General in 2020,<sup>25</sup> provides examples of positive experiences to prevent toxic stress and promote healing from childhood adversity, including healthy relationships, sleep, physical exercise, nutrition, mental and behavioral health, and mindfulness. HOPE has created a crosswalk linking the “stress-buster” model in this volume to the four building blocks.
- The concept of establishing early relational health through child-caregiver relationships, which was developed by David Willis, CSSP Senior Fellow and former Division Director of Home Visiting and Early Childhood Systems for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Health Resources and Services Administration, is being used by several child health systems to support two-generation care.<sup>26</sup> For example, federal Medicaid regulations now include coverage for child health providers to screen for and treat the mothers’ post-partum depression, a change from prior practices of covering only direct services to children.
- The CDC’s Essentials for Childhood national collaborative program promotes the development of state-wide policies and norms that support families with young children, focused on the need to establish and support the safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments that are a fundamental building block of positive childhood experiences.<sup>27</sup>

By adding a unifying focus on the child’s own experience, HOPE adds an overarching framework that knits together these disparate programs and projects that work at the family, community, and policy levels (Fig. 3). The HOPE framework helps direct service providers understand how each of these efforts supports key positive childhood experiences, and organizations use the HOPE framework to better align their services and to inform training and continuous improvement tools.

Figure 3:



## HOPE, Equity, and Racism

The HOPE approach supports equity and anti-racist efforts in several ways. The framework is intended to ensure that every child has equitable access to the four building blocks regardless of race, class, gender identity, or other identities affected by inequality. By identifying, honoring, and promoting children’s and families’ strengths, abilities, and connections—rather than presuming children or caregivers are deficient because of their race—direct service providers who use the HOPE approach come to understand the extraordinary stamina that many people of color have had to acquire to live and develop within racist systems.

HOPE training links the identification of these strengths to the proven anti-bias strategy of individuating (i.e., evaluating people on the basis of their personal characteristics, not by generalities associated with their group). Broader appreciation of relationships, environments, engagement, and emotional growth positions program participants as individuals, rather than as stereotypes or victims. Finally, HOPE encourages practitioners to elicit families’ hopes and dreams and to understand that seeking help to pursue those dreams is a sign of strength. This helps practitioners overcome their unconscious biases and improve their empathy toward parents and families.

“By identifying, honoring, and promoting children’s and families’ strengths, abilities, and connections...HOPE positions program participants as individuals, rather than as stereotypes or victims.”

In addition to these individual-level dimensions related to children and families, many of HOPE's building blocks can be addressed at a societal level. For example, government policies that offer paid family leave support the HOPE pillar of being in nurturing, supportive relationships by giving parents more time with their newborn children. Efforts to achieve environmental justice and to address systemic racism in educational funding and programming reflect HOPE's building block of safe and equitable physical and emotional environments at home and school.<sup>28</sup>

### Moving Forward: Opportunities and Implications for Action

The diffusion-of-innovation theory of how interventions spread<sup>29</sup> recognizes multiple steps in the change process, beginning with the most experimental and innovative sector and then moving through early adopters until, eventually, the majority of a population uses the innovation. Accordingly, as developers of HOPE we assumed that we would synthesize data, propose innovations, and then disseminate them through innovative organizations until they reached direct service providers. In our meetings with thousands of direct service providers, however, we found instead that HOPE-related innovations are already in place, sometimes beyond the view of the umbrella organization. Consequently, our model for getting practices, policies, and systems to focus on positive childhood experiences has become less linear and far more bi-directional.

To move forward in promoting HOPE-informed practice, frontline service providers, leaders of child- and family-serving systems and field-leading organizations, developers of training and tools for practitioners and materials for parents, and policymakers all must play a role in promoting positive experiences and collaborative relationships with families.

Frontline providers of child- and family-facing services (e.g., child and maternal health, home visits, early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, out-of-school programs, and other programs for children and youth) can use the HOPE framework to better integrate questions about children's and parent/caregivers' positive experiences into assessments and monitoring. Although assessing adverse experiences can lead to better understanding of the mental and physical consequences of past trauma, routine inquiries into the child's relationships, environment, engagement, and opportunities for emotional growth provide important additional information that can lay the groundwork for collaborating with families (and with other sources of support) to address their challenges.

Leaders of child- and family-serving systems and field-leading organizations can integrate HOPE's approach into guidance for practitioners that focuses on key positive factors. For example:

- The 2021 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)'s policy statement on the prevention of toxic stress, and the accompanying clinical report on trauma-informed care, both

emphasize the importance of relational health as well as more general considerations of positive childhood experiences during office visits and other interactions with families.

- The fourth edition of AAP's Bright Futures Tool and Resource Kit provides guidance for assessing child and family strengths at each routine health maintenance visit.

Developers of training and tools for practitioners should incorporate a focus on positive experiences by making sure the tools and information help practitioners systematically identify, honor, and promote child and family strengths. Building on the Strengthening Families approach, and principles of trauma-informed care, this includes helping practitioners take a structured approach to the initial assessment, conversations with parents or caregivers, and programmatic elements so that practitioners interact with families (e.g., spending time on the playground with children) and talk with them in ways that lift up the strengths of individuals and families who have experienced trauma. Elements of the HOPE framework currently are being introduced in training for the Parents as Teachers and Healthy Families America models.

Developers of materials for parents should build from the fundamental knowledge that most parents do the best they can to raise their children and that sustained, loving relationships between parents and their children are at the core of child development and family well-being. The HOPE framework can be used to develop materials and tools for parents that celebrate this relationship, capture the sense of joy and wonder in child-rearing, and position each person as an individual with essential human dignity. Moreover, the framework supports a variety of materials that allow for many types of experiences, to accommodate different types of families living in different environments. The first two pediatric settings to systematically implement HOPE each developed ways for parents to describe how their children access positive experiences related to each of HOPE's building blocks. The clinics—one in a rural, White, English-speaking community and the other in an urban Spanish-Speaking community—found that these simple tools improved mutual trust and respect between families and providers.<sup>30</sup>

Policymakers can use the HOPE framework to craft policies that increase families' ability to generate and sustain positive childhood experiences. Such policies emphasize:

- Relationships—by ensuring access to paid leave at the time of an infant's birth or adoption, which supports the development of foundational relationships that are essential for early relational health;
- Environment—through income supports, including the child tax credit, that improve families' access to the safe and equitable home environments needed to optimize children's development, and through policies that support access to high-quality, safe, and equitable childcare and early childhood education environments where children can play and learn;

- Engagement—through an array of out-of-school time programs (academic as well as activities such as sports, arts, politics, religion, or civic engagement) that engage young children and teens in positive experiences that make them more likely to thrive; and
- Emotional growth—by promoting the peer interactions and child-centered play that drives children’s emotional growth (e.g., through policies that ensure children’s access to convenient, safe, and attractive playgrounds, parks, and informal out-of-school activities).

Policymakers can find additional guidance from InCK Marks, an initiative to help states, communities, health experts, practitioner champions, and advocates advance child health care transformation at the federal, state, and community levels. With leadership from Charles Bruner and a national advisory team chaired by Kay Johnson, InCK Marks developed a framework for child health care transformation that sets out the interrelated elements of child health care transformation, including practice, metrics, finance, and culture.

Funders can best encourage and support efforts to promote positive childhood experiences by creating a new narrative around positive experiences. Given the strong evidence and interest in HOPE, attention from key funders can accelerate the trajectory that will make HOPE and positive childhood experiences into a unifying narrative that is as powerful and ubiquitous as ACES, toxic stress, and trauma-informed care. Attention from funders could support broad professional and public awareness of what powerful forces PCEs are in early and on-going development.

- State and local governments can incorporate requirements for workforce training and updated procedures to ensure that their vendors provide care to families that incorporates key elements of the HOPE approach. Agencies that contract with vendors to provide direct services to children and families can require that staff training, policies, and resources for those services include the identification, celebration, and promotion of positive childhood experiences. (This change builds on previous successful efforts to incorporate trauma-informed care and other advances into policies and practices.)
- Federal agencies and national funders can support ongoing efforts to build knowledge about positive childhood experiences. Earlier insights into the effects of adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress established the fact that experience affects child development, and the models produced by those studies can greatly speed the development of new research on positive childhood experiences. Foundations and government agencies can expand their support of conferences to enhance the formation of networks of opinion leaders, pilot interventions, and research studies.

- Local philanthropic organizations can fund local efforts to adapt and implement the HOPE framework across sectors and can suggest using it to design collective impact strategies for improving child and family outcomes.

Over the next decade, we expect that the scientific understanding of positive experiences will expand, and that the translation of this new knowledge into practice will take hold.

[Read a Q & A with author Robert Sege.](#)

---

To learn more about the essays or to provide feedback, [please email us.](#)

---

### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4),

245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797(98)00017-8)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Feldman, R. (2015). Sensitive periods in human social development: New insights from research on oxytocin, synchrony, and high-risk parenting. *Development and Psychopathology*, 27(2), 369-395.

<sup>4</sup> Scatliffe, N., Casavant, S., Vittner, D., Cong, X. (2019). Oxytocin and early parent-infant interactions: A systematic review. *International Journal of Nursing Sciences* 6(4): 445-453. ISSN 2352-0132, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2019.09.009>.

<sup>5</sup> Lopez, M., Ruiz, M.O., Rovnaghi, C.R. et al. (2021). The social ecology of childhood and early life adversity. *Pediatr Res* 89: 353–367. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-020-01264-x>.

<sup>6</sup> Feldman, R. (2015). Sensitive periods in human social development: New insights from research on oxytocin, synchrony, and high-risk parenting. *Development and Psychopathology*, 27(2), 369-395.

<sup>7</sup> Scatliffe, N., Casavant, S., Vittner, D., Cong, X. (2019). Oxytocin and early parent-infant interactions: A systematic review. *International Journal of Nursing Sciences* 6(4): 445-453. ISSN 2352-0132, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2019.09.009>.

<sup>8</sup> Lopez, M., Ruiz, M.O., Rovnaghi, C.R. et al. (2021). The social ecology of childhood and early life adversity. *Pediatr Res* 89: 353–367. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-020-01264-x>.

<sup>9</sup> Cassidy, J. M., & Cramer, S. C. (2017). Spontaneous and therapeutic-induced mechanisms of functional recovery after stroke. *Translational stroke research*, 8(1): 33-46.x

<sup>10</sup> Kwak, S., Lee, T. Y., Jung, W. H., Hur, J. W., Bae, D., Hwang, W. J., ... & Kwon, J. S. (2019). The

immediate and sustained positive effects of meditation on resilience are mediated by changes in the resting brain. *Frontiers in human neuroscience* 13: 101.

<sup>11</sup> Thiebaut de Schotten, M., Cohen, L., Amemiya, E., Braga, L. W., & Dehaene, S. (2014). Learning to read improves the structure of the arcuate fasciculus. *Cerebral Cortex*, 24(4): 989-995.

<sup>12</sup> Dehaene, S., Pegado, F., Braga, L. W., Ventura, P., Nunes Filho, G., Jobert, A., ... & Cohen, L. (2010). How learning to read changes the cortical networks for vision and language. *Science* 330(6009): 1359-1364.

<sup>13</sup> Nakagawa et. al. (2016) Effects of post-traumatic growth on the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex after a disaster. *Nature/Scientific Reports* 6:34364.

<sup>14</sup> Bethell, C., Jones, J., Gombojav, N., Linkenbach, J., & Sege, R. (2019). Positive childhood experiences and adult mental and relational health in a statewide sample: Associations across adverse childhood experiences levels. *JAMA pediatrics* 173(11): e193007-e193007.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.montanainstitute.com/the-science-of-the-positive>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/communication-resources/efc-promoting-positive-community-norms.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Sege, R. D., & Browne, C. H. (2017). Responding to ACEs with HOPE: Health outcomes from positive experiences. *Academic Pediatrics* 17(7): S79-S85.

<sup>19</sup> Harper Browne, C. (2016). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework™: A Pathway to Healthy Development and Well-Being. In: Shapiro, C.J., Harper Browne, C, eds. *Innovative Approaches to Supporting Families of Young Children*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Pp. 1-24.

<sup>20</sup> Scales, P.C., Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Benson, P.L. (2003). *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Community: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations*. In Lerner, R.M., Benson, P.L., eds. *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice*. Boston, MA: Springer. Pp. 19-43.

<sup>22</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2014). *The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper*. ©

<sup>23</sup> Arbour, M.C., Floyd, B., Morton, S., Hampton, P., Murphy-Sims, J., Doyle, S., Atwood, S., and Sege, R. (October 2021). Cross-Sector Approach Expands Screening and Addresses Health-Related Social Needs in Primary Care. *Pediatrics*, e2021050152; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-050152>.

<sup>24</sup> Sege, R.D., Preer, G., Morton, S. J., Cabral, H., Morakinyo, O., Lee, V., Abreu, C., De Vos, E., and Kaplan-Sanoff, M. (2015). Medical-Legal Strategies to Improve Infant Health Care: A Randomized Trial. *Pediatrics* 1:97–9106. PMID 26034248.

<sup>25</sup> [https://osg.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/266/2020/12/Roadmap-For-Resilience\\_CA-Surgeon-Generals-Report-on-ACEs-Toxic-Stress-and-Health\\_12092020.pdf](https://osg.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/266/2020/12/Roadmap-For-Resilience_CA-Surgeon-Generals-Report-on-ACEs-Toxic-Stress-and-Health_12092020.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <https://thecsspdev.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Early-Relational-Health-Webinar-6.12.19.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/index.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://positiveexperience.org/about-us/#anti-racism-statement>

<sup>29</sup> See: Dearing J. W. (2009). Applying Diffusion of Innovation Theory to Intervention Development. *Research on social work practice*, 19(5), 503–518. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731509335569>.

<sup>30</sup> See: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/b0275965-2f8f-4b51-a26e-49b08fce83e9/Strengths%20Based%20Building%20Blocks.pdf> and <https://positiveexperience.org/hope-in-practice-resilience-university-in-lewiston-me/>.

## Essay 7

### Community Leadership in a Time of Crisis and Trauma

*Authored by:*

**Sondra Samuels**

**President & CEO, Northside Achievement Zone**



---

*Jump to:*

- [Transforming in Crises](#)
- [Leading Through Crisis](#)
- [Lessons from Leading in Crisis](#)
- [Looking Forward](#)
- [Sources](#)

---

Since 2010, the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) has been the “backbone” of an ecosystem of more than 30 partner organizations that provide a continuum of cradle-to-career, whole-family support for close to 1,000 families and 2,000 children annually in an effort to permanently close the achievement gap and end generational poverty in North Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the most populous areas of the Northside, 77 percent of residents are people of color, and 50 percent are Black.<sup>1</sup> The Minneapolis Public Schools system has been able to

educate White children so that 80 percent of them can read at grade level by the end of third grade, but they have only helped 22 percent of Black students reach that benchmark.<sup>2</sup> Seventy-four percent of the families served by NAZ earn less than \$30,000 a year, compared with a median income of \$83,000 for White households in Minneapolis.<sup>3</sup>

A core part of NAZ's strategy has always been to develop and support long-term community power and voice, especially by parents and young people. We do this in two ways: by offering parenting education, as well as parent and youth empowerment classes that make up the NAZ Family Academy, along with one-on-one coaching to set family goals; and by working with our organizational partners and community leaders to uncover programmatic needs and systemic obstacles, create plans for change, track progress data in a shared data system, and analyze the data to adjust strategies.

NAZ's commitments to community power and voice in community change were reinforced and tested in 2020 and 2021, as our community endured a series of especially traumatic events. COVID-19 left families impacted by shutdowns, the subsequent loss of jobs, and the resulting trauma. The murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020 ignited justified anger, protests, and demands for justice nationally and worldwide but was especially intense for the people of Minneapolis. At the same time, the number of shootings surged. Eighty-four murders were recorded in Minneapolis in 2020, up from 48 the year before.<sup>4</sup> As I write this in early December 2021, the year-to-date number of homicides in Minneapolis is 91—just six shy of the city's record of 97 (set in 1995).<sup>5</sup> There have been more than 616 gunshot victims<sup>6</sup> in Minneapolis this year, and more than 54 children were caught in the crossfire.<sup>7</sup> The violence has been relentless: Within one 29-hour period alone, 4 people were killed, including a 12-year-old.<sup>8</sup>

The violence and trauma have hit NAZ families especially hard, with almost 50 percent of the gunfire happening in North Minneapolis neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, three Northside children between the ages of 6 and 12 were killed by gunfire, and a fourth is in critical condition after being shot in the head.<sup>10</sup> This year, a beloved male African-American paraprofessional at one of our partner schools was also killed; a NAZ partner was almost killed during a shootout at a nearby school; and a soccer coach in one of the city programs was grazed by a bullet.

NAZ's office has been shot up three times. The first time, we temporarily covered our windows with plywood, but the next round of bullets went right through that and into our cubicles. We are still considering bulletproof windows, but the \$300,000 price tag is prohibitive. Some of our staff—half of whom live in the neighborhood—are afraid to return to work in our building.

Right before this same tumultuous period, one of NAZ's co-founders departed, and we brought new leaders on board. Collectively, these events called on all of the leadership capacity NAZ has developed, supported, and exhibited in our neighborhood, city, and state. The crises also

changed the roles that we play as a community leader. We had to not only transform in crisis but lead through crisis.

### Transforming in Crisis

John F. Kennedy famously said that the Chinese word for “crisis” is composed of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” Although Kennedy was technically wrong—the second character is more accurately translated as “change point”—he got the gist of it right: a time of change is a perilous point at which things can go wrong. People and organizations tend to change either in response to great suffering or great love, and too often it is from great suffering. As leaders in the non-profit space, our opportunity is to make sure that the change leads to something better.

Even before the murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest that followed, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to eliminate the deep disparities that exist in Minneapolis and in Minnesota between White and Black people. Differences in access to health care, exposure to unsafe conditions, COVID’s health outcomes and death rates, job loss and unemployment, and the fear of loss of housing were reminders that hard truths become even harder and truer in a crisis. We can do plenty of comprehensive work on the ground in communities, but if systems that control the factors affecting that work don’t change, we wind up pretty much back where we started. In that sense, I suppose I am grateful to the recent crises for giving us an opportunity in which enough people became so aware of the desperation that we heard a unified call for change.

For our community and organizational leaders, the call for change centered on fixing the operating mandates and equity structures of two broken systems: education and policing. The outrageous reading proficiency gap between Black and White students, cited earlier, is an adult problem and a systems problem, not a child problem. On the policing side, George Floyd’s murder was emblematic of a long history of racist policing. At the same time, the police presence is insufficient to manage the gun violence, carjackings, and break-ins that mar life across the city but especially in North Minneapolis. As a Northside resident recently told reporters, “There are bullets coming through our homes, through our cars, and through our children.” Calls for change on these long-term, systemic problems gave a new focus and urgency to community leadership.

### Leading Through Crisis

Leading change in a period of crisis requires community leaders and leading organizations to be flexible enough to assume new roles, able to manage new risks in how we exert leadership, and extra attentive to growing the power of the people, especially parents and youth.

Flexibility to meet the moment. NAZ's mission is to create a culture of achievement in which all children graduate from high school college- and career-ready. During the pandemic, however, we also had to become emergency responders to meet our community's imminent needs. We knew NAZ was a critical lifeline for our families and partners. So, when we surveyed neighborhood families in 2020, during the early months of the COVID-19 lockdown, and they listed food as one of their greatest needs, we obtained a \$1 million grant from UnitedHealth Group for a food delivery program that we operated in partnership with NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center, Appetite For Change, The Humanity Alliance, Minnesota Central Kitchen and Second Harvest Heartland. The food reached more than 300 families. Just as importantly, it demonstrated our ability to pivot to the intersection of NAZ's long-term mission and the immediate needs of the community we serve. Eventually, as we shift out of emergency mode, the emergency responder role will have to revert to our partners, but in the short term we all needed to fill the role and so we did.

Ability to manage new risks. The stakes are high enough during a crisis that the complicated positions leaders must juggle can put community relationships and partnerships with other allies at risk. As NAZ's CEO, I have had to become a leader of the "both/and" movement. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, for instance, activists called for defunding the Minneapolis Police Department. However, as the amount of gun violence in our city grew, many Northside residents also wanted an increase in police staffing, which had significantly dwindled, to protect our children. I felt it was my responsibility as a 24-year resident of the Northside to demand both police accountability AND authentic reform, while also joining other neighbors in a successful lawsuit that forced the city to keep the number of police officers at the level required by the city charter. Although this was not something I did as the NAZ President and CEO, I knew no other way to keep both my neighbors and my NAZ families and children safe.

Sometimes this complexity requires me to take controversial positions. Even before the COVID crisis caused detrimental levels of learning loss for our children, two influential leaders proposed changing the state constitution to specify that every child in Minnesota has the civil right to a quality education based on agreed-upon quality standards (the current language says they deserve an 'adequate' education, to be funded by taxation). I supported and still support the proposed language change to the constitution in the form of an educational equality bill, even though a lot of other people oppose it.<sup>11</sup> I am committed to this change because I believe it represents a way to codify our state's articulated commitment to end racial injustice and inequities in education. Again, the leadership role is about both pursuing your stated mission and taking on additional challenges, despite the risks, to do what is right for the people you serve.

Attentiveness to people power. We know that Northside families are our most important partners in transforming their life outcomes and the overall well-being of the community. Initially, NAZ talked about “community engagement” and “parent engagement,” and our focus was on getting parents to show up in numbers and complete their goals. But it became really clear that “engagement” doesn’t focus any leadership development on the inherent power and voice that already resides in our families and their children. With each real opportunity to step up and be included, parents’ resolve to be informed, to be heard, and to play a role in dismantling historic systems of racialized oppression grows stronger.

So, we transformed how we think and talk about community leadership as parent power and community power, which includes youth. We’re not giving community leaders power, we’re just helping them tap into their inherent power by providing education and skill-building opportunities, ensuring that they have a say in the decisions being made about their lives, and giving them a central role in our advocacy efforts. The notion is that we’re all in this together and we’re getting better together by building on our assets to transform the community.

We provide clear pathways into parent leadership roles. NAZ offers 8- to 12-week classes in parenting skills and personal empowerment training through our Family Academy classes. Parents in these classes who make significant progress and want to continue becoming community leaders meet with our parent mobilization coordinator, who connects them to more training and leadership opportunities. Several parents are completing extensive training to become paid facilitators of Family Academy courses.

We recruit parents to participate as full members of NAZ’s Board of Directors. In addition, a group of 25 trained parent leaders meets bi-monthly to inform NAZ’s work and to implement parent-focused strategies for influencing the systems that affect their families and children. We also created a NAZ staff position, Vice President for Family and Community Impact, which is held by one of our longest-serving organizational leaders who also happens to be an Associate pastor from the community.

With funding from Strive Together and the Ballmer Group, we work with the Education Partnerships Coalition (EPC) to build parent power and voice statewide. The coalition, which NAZ co-founded, is a network of eight organizations that take a comprehensive, place-based, birth-to-career approach to eliminate opportunity gaps while engaging more than 120,000 youth and their families across the state. Through a nine-month fellowship with EPC, a cohort of NAZ parent leaders receive intensive training in the legislative process, community advocacy, and systems impact. Fellows identify an issue in the community that they want to address and receive the tools and support they need to develop an action that leads to a policy recommendation.

## Lessons from Leading in Crisis

NAZ's experiences in 2020 and 2021 highlighted several lessons about community leadership that, while not new, proved especially relevant during times of crisis.

1. During a crisis, leadership needs a solid base of trust and partnership to build upon. One of the things I am most grateful for is the fact that when COVID-19 and civil unrest hit Minneapolis, we could stand on the trust we had already built across organizations, schools, and neighborhood residents. The trust that already existed enabled me and about 30 of my fellow organizational leaders to combine forces quickly. We organized bi-weekly Zoom meetings where we discussed the needs of the families we serve and the obstacles we faced. This is where we got updates on what the mental health, housing, early childhood/K-12 education, and economic development systems were doing and saying about COVID; heard from our lobbyist about the state legislature's plans for shutdowns and recovery dollars; and discussed how to spend the emergency funds we raised. When violence surged, we shared best practices for keeping our staffs and our neighborhood families safe and for dealing with the trauma. We found power and safety in numbers. It made us feel less isolated, and it gave us the solidarity to be pit bulls—not just squeaky wheels—in pressuring elected officials to keep our kids safe.
2. Collaboration is a super power. The beauty of responding to the crises as partners was that we didn't operate in silos, and by sharing information and coordinating resources each of our organizations had greater reach and impact. So, for example, when COVID-related economic pressures increased Northside families' economic hardship, NAZ made \$440,000 of emergency cash and \$325,000 of rent relief available, and our housing partners identified many of the families who most needed rent support. When violence flared, we were able to refer families to mental health supports provided by our own Community Wellness team and our wellness partner, the Washburn Center for Children. When school, afterschool, and other education partners told us about children's technology needs, NAZ used resources we raised to provide more than 1,200 devices, 1,600 noise-canceling headphones, on-call professional tech support, and high-speed internet service to qualifying Northside youth and families. Our collaborators at Reading Partners and Minnesota Reading Corps provided individual literacy tutoring to 70 Northside children in the early grades, while NAZ distributed 100,000 disposable face masks to early childhood partners in the community. And we keep looking for new partnerships to ensure that our response to the crises is comprehensive. At the state level, the Education Partnership Coalition has been an important vehicle for collaboration. Through our collective advocacy efforts, Minnesota state grants to EPC communities have increased exponentially—from \$700,000 in 2015 to \$4 million in

2020—and NAZ and the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood both succeeded in getting our state funding written into Minnesota’s base budget, rather than continuing to rely on discretionary dollars (something we are working on for our Greater Minnesota members as well).

3. Shared values serve as the north star. Partnerships among leaders of community transformation efforts are like a marriage: you may have other priorities beyond the ones you share, you may not all speak out on all of the same issues or in the exact same ways, and you may not agree sometimes, but you have to share an underlying set of core values. In the Northside, the core values of *children succeeding* and *advancing racial equity* have ensured that the sum of collaborative leadership is greater than its parts, during a crisis and in “normal” times.
4. Sustained system change efforts must continue in earnest, no matter what happens. We can’t stop building community power and mobilizing to change systems just because we also have to meet the immediate needs of people in crisis; if we do, children and parents will continue to languish, and even our programmatic successes will have short-lived impact. The systems-change work involves identifying misalignment between who is at the table creating the rules or processes and the needs and goals of the people they’re meant to serve; leveraging relationships with key policy makers and programmatic movers and shakers; codifying improvements based on best practices; ensuring the people most impacted have a seat at the table; and creating or integrating organizational structures to make systems more accountable, measurable, and supportive of families. For example, even while we were working to get food and technology for distance learning to Northside kids and families, we kept up our efforts to advance the educational equality bill. We also advocated for a bill that would provide funding and access for all infants and toddlers living in low-income families—about 35,000 children across the state—to attend high-quality early learning centers. NAZ opposed state efforts to restrict alternative licensing for teachers, which would have made it harder for teachers of color to enter the profession. And we participate in a policy network made up of state and tribal agencies, counties, and local organizations that are working to align the welfare system with two-generation approaches for improving outcomes for children and families.

### Looking Forward

There is so much more yet to be done. While we sound the alarm of the cataclysmic trauma and learning loss our scholars are experiencing, and implement effective strategies to address it, we must also continue to build a pipeline for parent and youth power and voices to lead the way—ensuring that, someday, today’s youth can take over my job as president and CEO of NAZ.

We need more resources for community organizations to nurture the parent and youth leaders who are a large part of our hope for tomorrow; more communication expertise and vehicles to inform residents about issues and help them organize their own advocacy; and more capability to crunch our community numbers and data to illustrate trends and show our results. And we need steady investment in the economic well-being of our community, from public and private sources, so that parents can support their own families as they work for the broader community good.

Despite all, we are weathering the current crises and finding openings for transformation in what, on any given day, can be a bleak and discouraging picture. We will come through this as a stronger community—and when we do, it will be because of the strengths of people who inhabit our community and their unwillingness to settle for less than they and their children are entitled to.

---

*Sources:*

<sup>1</sup> “The Northside Story and NAZ’s Role in Changing the Narrative.” (August 2021). Northside Achievement Zone.

<sup>2</sup> Minneapolis Public Schools, MCA Assessment results, 2018.

[https://rea.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/2018\\_mca-iii\\_results\\_final.pdf](https://rea.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/2018_mca-iii_results_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ingraham, C. (May 30, 2020). “Racial Inequality in Minneapolis is Among the Worst in the Nation.” The Washington Post,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/30/minneapolis-racial-inequality>.

<sup>4</sup> Mannix, A. and Hargarten, J. (September 11, 2021). “Minneapolis’ Bloody Summer Puts City on Pace for Most Violent Year in a Generation.” Frontline, PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/minneapolis-bloody-summer-puts-city-on-pace-for-most-violent-year-in-a-generation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Minneapolis Police Department Crime Data MStat Dashboard and PIMS RMS; also WCCO. (December 1, 2021). “Minneapolis Sees 90th, 91st Homicides of 2021 after Violent Night.” <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2021/12/01/minneapolis-91st-homicide-2021/>

<sup>6</sup> Minneapolis Police Department PIMS Data, Week 47, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, B. (October 20, 2021). “Teen Shot Tuesday was 54th Child Shot in Minneapolis This Year.” KSTP.

<https://kstp.com/news/teenager-shot-tuesday-in-minneapolis-was-54th-victim-under-18-years-of-age-in-city-2021/6275609/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mannix, A. and Hargarten, J. (September 11, 2021). “Minneapolis’ Bloody Summer Puts City on Pace for Most Violent Year in a Generation.” Frontline, PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/minneapolis-bloody-summer-puts-city-on-pace-for-most-violent-year-in-a-generation/>

-most-violent-year-in-a-generation/.

<sup>9</sup> Mannix, A. and Hargarten, J. (September 11, 2021). "Minneapolis' Bloody Summer Puts City on Pace for Most Violent Year in a Generation." Frontline, PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/minneapolis-bloody-summer-puts-city-on-pace-for-most-violent-year-in-a-generation/>.

<sup>10</sup> "12-year-old Dies After Shooting in North Minneapolis." (September 8, 2021). KARE11.com, <https://www.kare11.com/article/news/crime/witnesses-say-child-shot-in-north-minneapolis/89-4f5294f1-4d26-41e7-8911-220b9a6609f8>.

<sup>11</sup> Many Black folks opposed the bill (which thus far has failed to pass), because it didn't specify who determines the standards or who establishes the quality measures. The teachers' union opposed the bill, arguing it could open the door to taxpayer-funded vouchers for private schools. Democrats who received the union's political backing generally opposed the bill, while Republicans worried an equal education law would open the state up to lawsuits. My non-profit partners in housing, health, career preparation, and economic development stood with me in theory, but those without a dog in the fight couldn't always expend the level of effort needed to overturn opposition.