

Population Accountability the Work for Our Generation

The United States was built upon the belief of rugged individualism, that if a person works hard enough, regardless of birth circumstances, she will obtain the American Dream and thrive. Her definition of the American Dream may not involve the same details as her neighbor, but what they share is this universal feeling of hope: the aspiration that with each generation a family's life outcomes can improve. However, this belief is threatened.¹ Where you live is a proxy for how well you live and for how long you live. Zip codes act as filters for whether or not a person can access and fully realize opportunity – opportunity to obtain a good education, to secure living-wage jobs, to access good health care and healthy food, to purchase a home and accrue wealth. In large part, opportunity is place-based. While it is difficult for Americans to come to terms with the history of race in America, it is undeniable that many of the structures that have designed opportunity into or out of communities have been intentional and based on race, and that their impacts, positive or negative, are still experienced today.

As a nation we are making progress dismantling societal and economic structures that are still barriers to opportunity for too many Americans. Yet more work is needed. More Americans must understand that the strength of our nation is inextricably bound with the fate of our most vulnerable. Our indifference and/or acceptance of policies that support inequitable school funding, that ignore discriminatory land-use planning and predatory lending, that selectively sidestep crumbling infrastructure in poor places essentially signal our apathy towards their effects on Americans who are impacted by them most. All of these factors – education, housing, infrastructure, health- inevitably shape the built and lived environment in which our lives begin and the paths of opportunity we can access to gain upward mobility. The architecture of inequity is real and we all have a role to play in re-designing communities of opportunity.

Over the past 60 years, significant strides have been made in improving the lives of children and their families living near or in poverty. Unfortunately, as the authors of *Voices From the Field III* acknowledge, “these investments have not aggregated to improvements in neighborhood-wide well-being or produced population-level changes.” Drawing on the insights of observers and actors in the field, the authors conclude that the reason for this shortcoming is that these human development investments have not reached adequate dose, scale, or duration. The authors go on to question the adequacy of the theory of change of past efforts, and in so doing, they ask a question that seems to be fundamental to shaping the work for this moment. They ask, “Should we reconsider the power of “community” as an entry point for producing population-wide change in human-development outcomes?”²

This question aligns with my experience playing leadership roles in large-scale community change efforts across America. We are learning that population-level change is achieved when community members make long-term commitments with actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Today, this desire for population-level impact is commonly referred to as collective impact. More specifically, we're learning that the probability of population-level impact is significantly increased when community members use a disciplined approach, like Results-Based Accountability (RBA) for moving from talk to action by declaring the population they seek to engage; the conditions of well-being for that population; how progress is measured in attaining those conditions; and crafting the right mix of strategies to pursue those conditions – strategies that include- families and community members sharing power in crafting strategies and owning contributions to the implementation of the strategies, implementation of consistent, high-quality programs, policy and/or system changes. Equally important, the probability of success further increases when the aforementioned mix of strategies is supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing

activities, ongoing communication, and staff dedicated to building and maintaining supporting infrastructure.

“The 1950s was the era of urban renewal. The 1960s linked antipoverty work with the civil rights movement. In the 1970s, large social welfare experiments were launched to address income support, employment, and housing. The 1980s brought the new federalism, the devolution of community development and social services programs to the state and local levels, and the introduction of indirect supports, such as tax credits, as primary development tools. In the 1990s, local innovation efforts attempted to integrate services and connect physical, human, social, and civic development. Also during this period, the philanthropic sector became an increasingly important influence in social, civic, and community development work.”

Given multi-sector leaders’ experience leading large-scale community change, and this stage in our evolution as a field, we are ready to move beyond siloed thinking and action. We are ready to take the next leap forward in the field of large-scale community change by putting all that we’ve learned into building comprehensive and integrated continua of supports for our nation’s most vulnerable children and their families. This needs to be done throughout their life course. This is the work for our generation.

As leaders, it’s time for our values, hopes, aspirations, and actions to be in alignment. Had we closed the achievement gap experienced by low-income children in 2008, the U.S. GDP would have increased by as much as \$670 billion.³ Making necessary investments to renew the nation’s infrastructure would create 2.4 million jobs per year, the majority of which would provide crucial access to living wages for low-income families and families of color.⁴ And, closing health disparities could generate annual savings of \$57 billion in medical expenses and \$252 million in lost productivity.⁵ Equity is an economic imperative for our nation. The vitality of an inclusive middle class rests in our hands. To revitalize it means taking up the challenge of inequity and engaging in the noble process of systems and policy changes that create just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

References

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